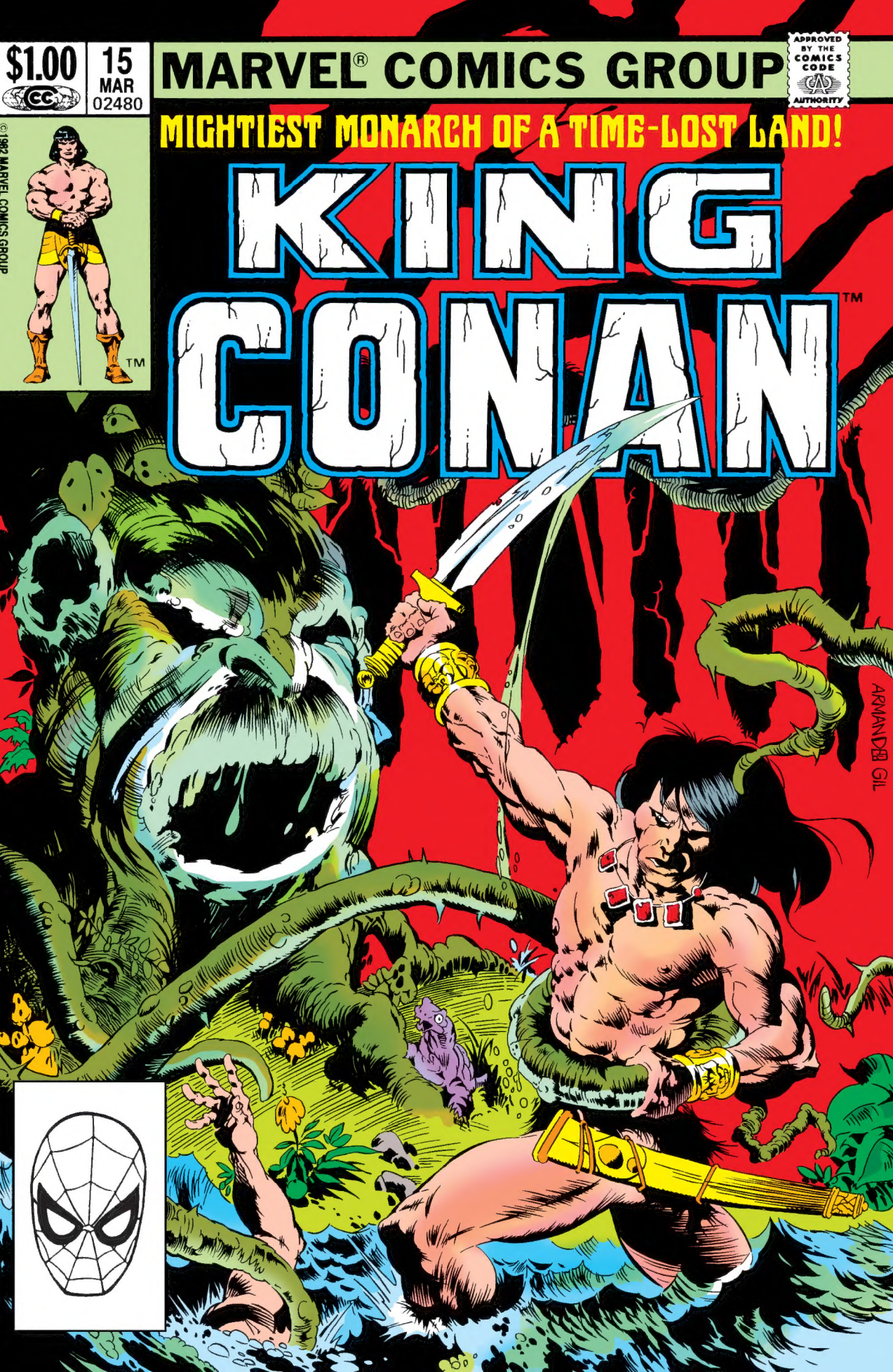
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MIGHTIEST MONARCH OF A TIME-LOST LAND!
KING CONAN™
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Stan Lee PRESENTS: KING CONAN

Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD

DOUG MOENCH, WRITER. MARC SILVESTRI, ARTIST. RICARDO VILLAMONTE & JON D'AGOSTINO, INKERS. MIKE HIGGINS, LETTERER. GEORGE ROUSSOS, COLORIST. DENNY O'NEIL, EDITOR. JIM SHOOTER, CHIEF

THE LOOTERS of R'SHANN

SCARCELY THREE PACES BEYOND THE THRESHOLD, A HUMMING DAGGER ALMOST STRIPS HIM OF HIS FALSE BEARD.
OVER HERE, OLD MAN--YOU'RE NEXT.
THE STENCH OF THE PLACE WOULD SET THE SKIN OF MOST KINGS TO CRAWLING...
BUT CONAN HAS SNIFFED IT OUT, IN DISGUISE, THE MEANEST TAVERN TARANTIA CAN BOAST--WAITING TO QUAFF A FEW ALES AWAY FROM THE INCESSANT BUZZ OF THE PALACE COURT, THE LEADEN BOREDOM OF THE THRONE...
AYE, WANTING THAT AND NOTHING MORE... SAVE PERHAPS A PRECIOUS PIECE OF HIS ROUGH PAST, AND WHO KNOWS BUT THAT THIS BRASH YOUTH MIGHT PROVIDE ALL THAT HE SEEKS-- AND MAYHAP EVEN MORE...

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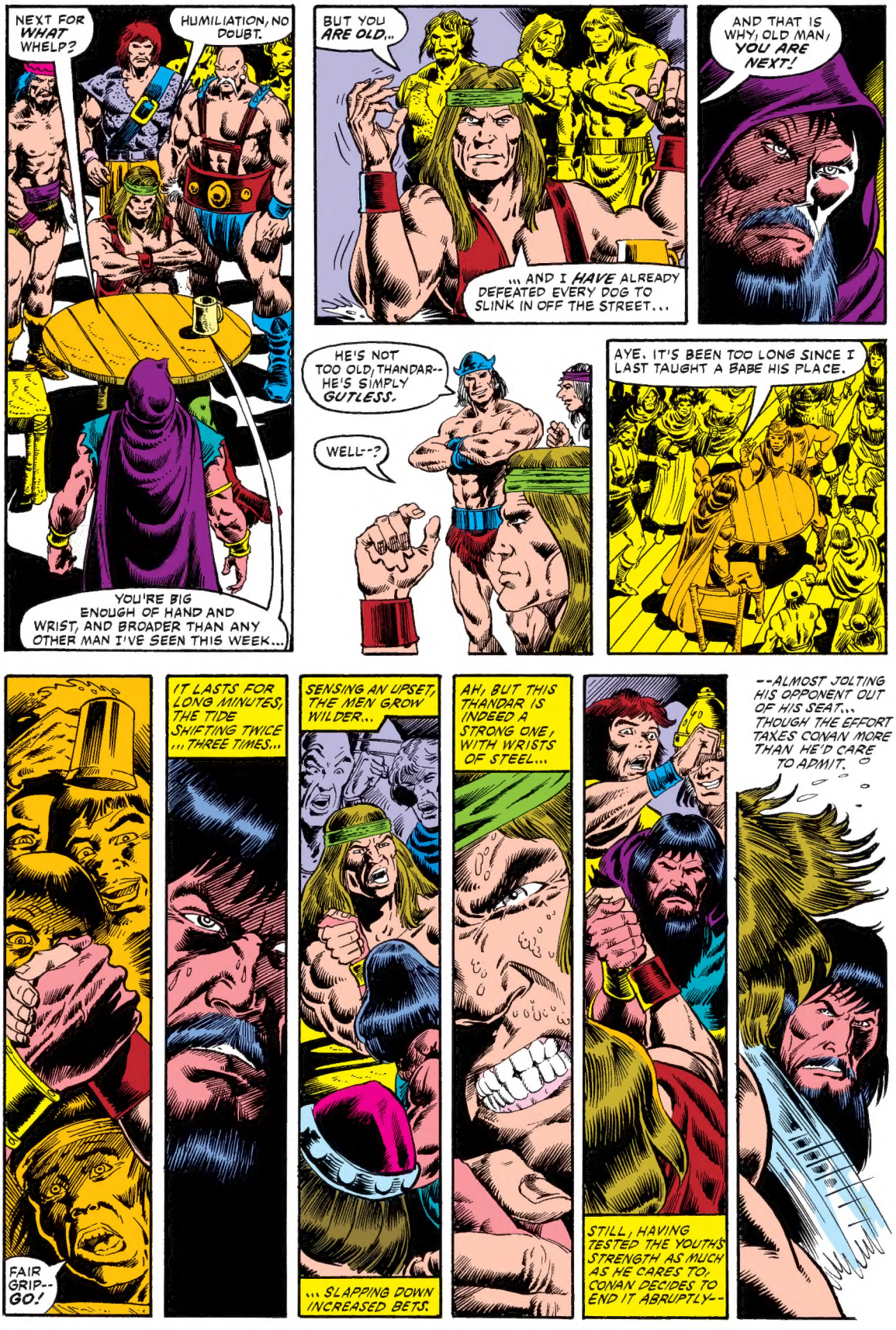

NEXT FOR WHAT WHELP?
HUMILIATION, NO DOUBT.
YOU'RE BIG ENOUGH OF HAND AND WRIST, AND BROADER THAN ANY OTHER MAN I'VE SEEN THIS WEEK...
BUT YOU ARE OLD...
... AND I HAVE ALREADY DEFEATED EVERY DOG TO SLINK IN OFF THE STREET...
AND THAT IS WHY, OLD MAN, YOU ARE NEXT!
HE'S NOT TOO OLD, THANDAR-- HE'S SIMPLY GUTLESS.
WELL--?
AYE. IT'S BEEN TOO LONG SINCE I LAST TAUGHT A BABE HIS PLACE.
FAIR GRIP-- GO!
IT LASTS FOR LONG MINUTES, THE TIDE SHIFTING TWICE ... THREE TIMES...
SENSING AN UPSET, THE MEN GROW WILDER...
... SLAPPING DOWN INCREASED BETS.
AH, BUT THIS THANDAR IS INDEED A STRONG ONE, WITH WRISTS OF STEEL...
STILL, HAVING TESTED THE YOUTH'S STRENGTH AS MUCH AS HE CARES TO, CONAN DECIDES TO END IT ABRUPTLY--
--ALMOST JOLTING HIS OPPONENT OUT OF HIS SEAT... THOUGH THE EFFORT TAXES CONAN MORE THAN HE'D CARE TO ADMIT.

HE DID IT! HE BEAT THANDAR!
NOT BAD FOR AN OLD MAN... BUT HAD I TAKEN YOU ON FIRST, RATHER THAN TENTH, I'D HAVE TWISTED YOU TO YOUR KNEES IN THE FLOOR-SPILL.
OH?
AND HAVE YOU CONTESTED TEN MEN WITH THE BLADE TONIGHT...
...OR WOULD I BE THE FIRST?
THE MEN DRAW BACK HASTILY, CLEARING ROOM.
THERE IS ONE WOMAN HOWEVER, WHO LEANS FORWARD MOST AVIDLY..
YOU'D BE THE FIRST, OLD MAN...
...BUT SINCE YOU BESTED ME FAIRLY...
...AND SINCE I SHOULD HAVE ADMITTED IT WITHOUT INSULT...
...BUY YOURSELF AN ALE INSTEAD.
WELL--?
CONAN TURNS AWAY, NEITHER ACCEPTING THE COIN--
--NOR PRESSING THE FIGHT.

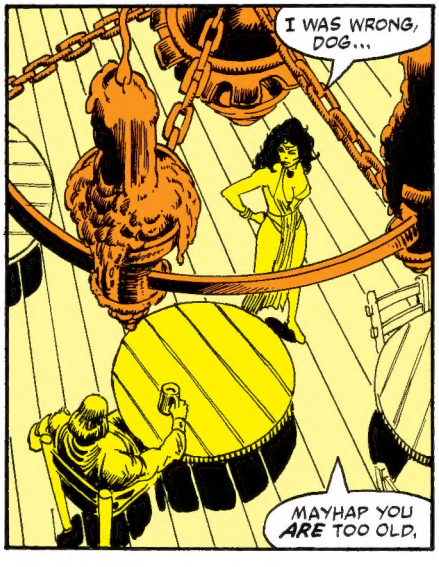
LATER, AND FROM A TABLE AFAR, CONAN WATCHES THANDAR BOISTEROUSLY HOLD COURT.
WHAT WOULD THE YOUTH SAY, HE WONDERS, IF HE KNEW HE'D BEEN BESTED BY HIS KING?

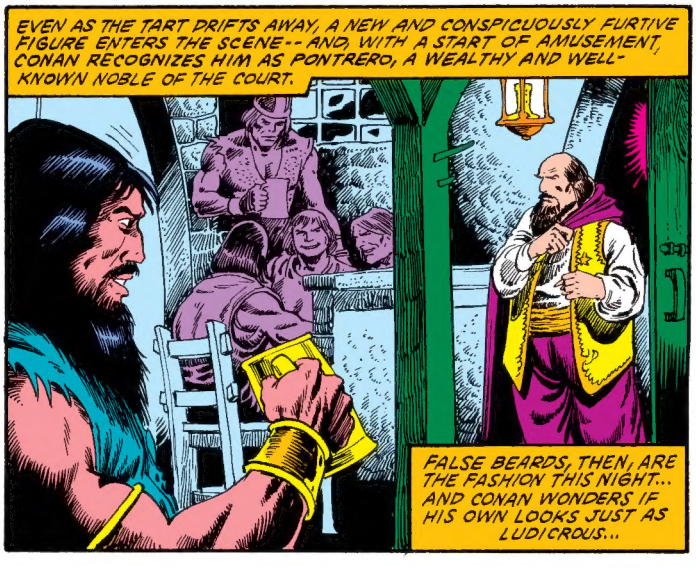
A RUEFUL SMILE VISITS CONAN'S FACE, FOR HE IS MUCH REMINDED OF HIMSELF IN YOUNGER DAYS...
...ALTHOUGH HE NEVER WOULD HAVE BOUGHT HIS WAY OUT OF A FIGHT, AGAINST AN OLDER MAN OR NOT.
BESIDES, EVEN IF HE HAS LIVED LONG ENOUGH TO SEE THE WORLD AND MORE--

--HE'S HARDLY READY FOR A DEATH-BED...
I DON'T THINK YOU'RE TOO OLD-- NOT IN THE WAYS THAT COUNT.
AND MY NAME, BY THE WAY, IS BRISSA.

ACROSS THE ROOM, CONAN NOTES, THANDAR'S MOOD TURNS SWIFTLY SOUR-- THE GIRL IS PROBABLY HIS FAVORITE...

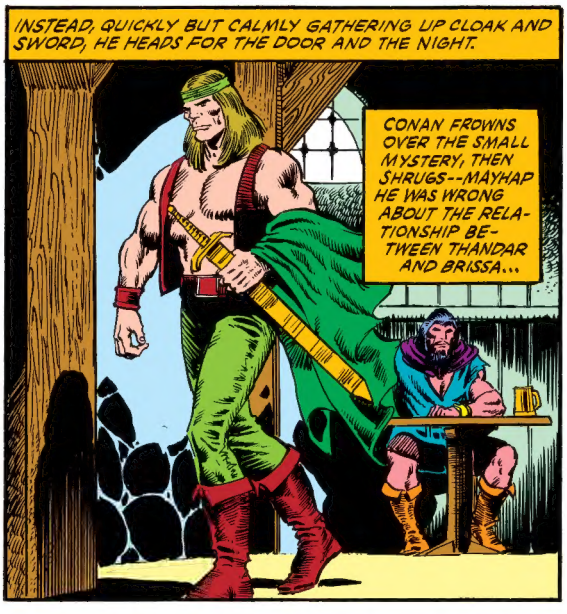
THEN GO FIND YOURSELF SOME OTHER PARTNER, BRISSA, WITH WHOM TO CONSPIRE YOUR DRAMA OF JEALOUSY.


I WAS WRONG, DOG...
MAYHAP YOU ARE TOO OLD.


EVEN AS THE TART DRIFTS AWAY, A NEW AND CONSPICUOUSLY FURTIVE FIGURE ENTERS THE SCENE-- AND, WITH A START OF AMUSEMENT, CONAN RECOGNIZES HIM AS PONTRERO, A WEALTHY AND WELL-KNOWN NOBLE OF THE COURT.
FALSE BEARDS, THEN, ARE THE FASHION THIS NIGHT... AND CONAN WONDERS IF HIS OWN LOOKS JUST AS LUDICROUS...

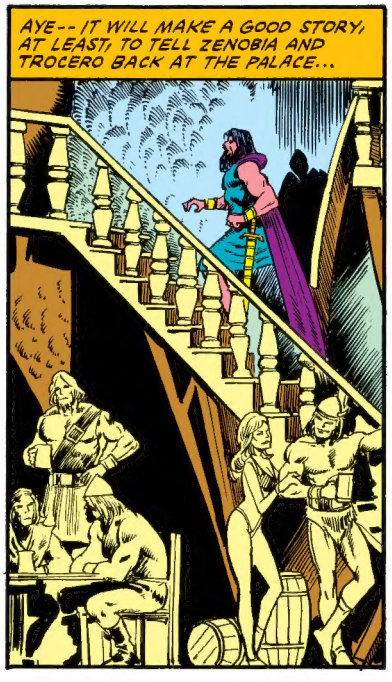
WHAT IS THIS? THE TART BRISSA--MAKING A BEELINE FOR PONTRERO, LEADING HIM UP THE STAIRS...
A PLANNED ASSIGNATION, THEN, AND FAR MORE THAN A SPONTANEOUS ACT TO DRAW JEALOUSY.

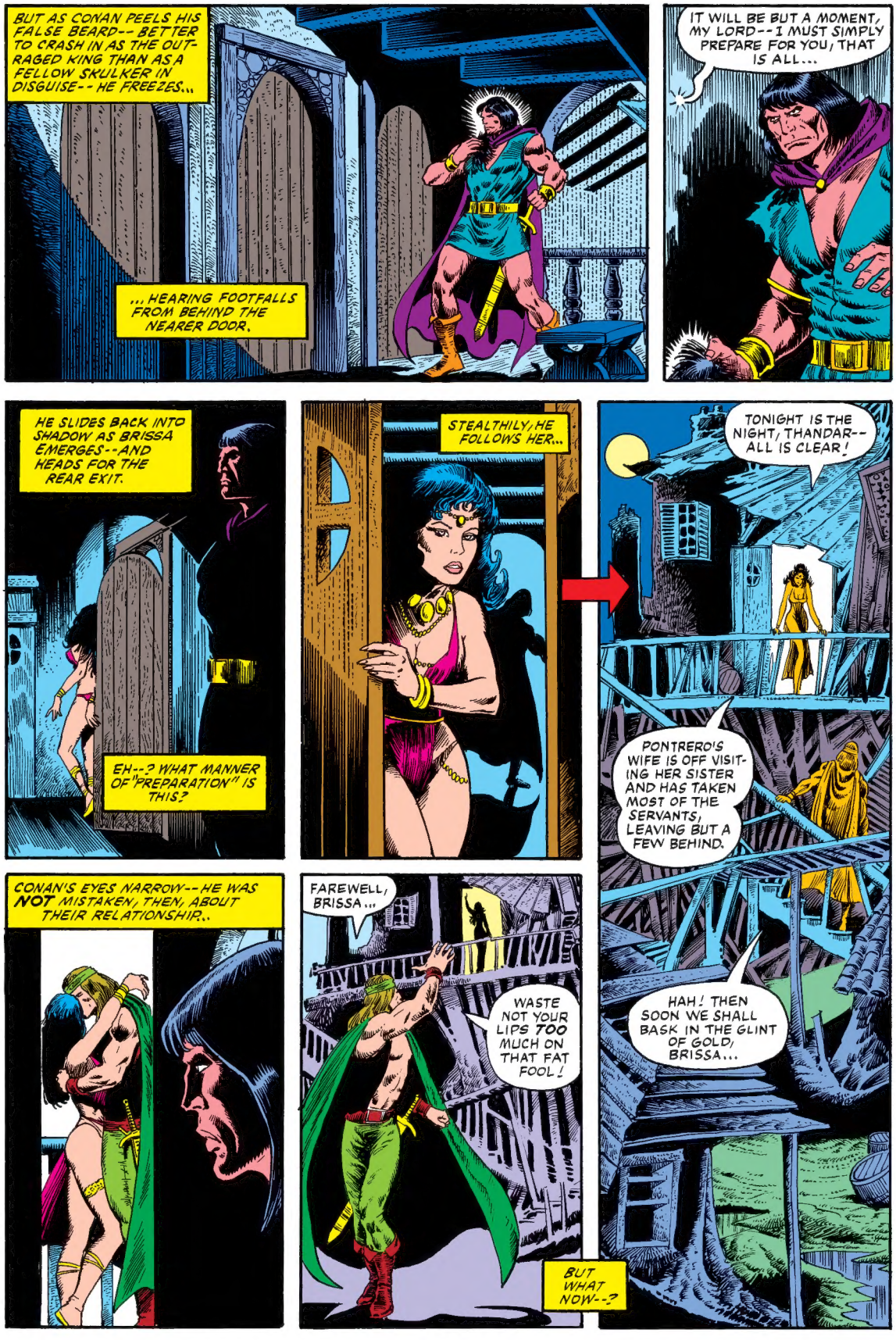
YET IN THE MIEN OF THE BRASH YOUNG THANDAR, WATCHING THEM DISAPPEAR AT THE CREST OF THE STAIRS, THERE SHOWS NO TRACE OF ANGER...

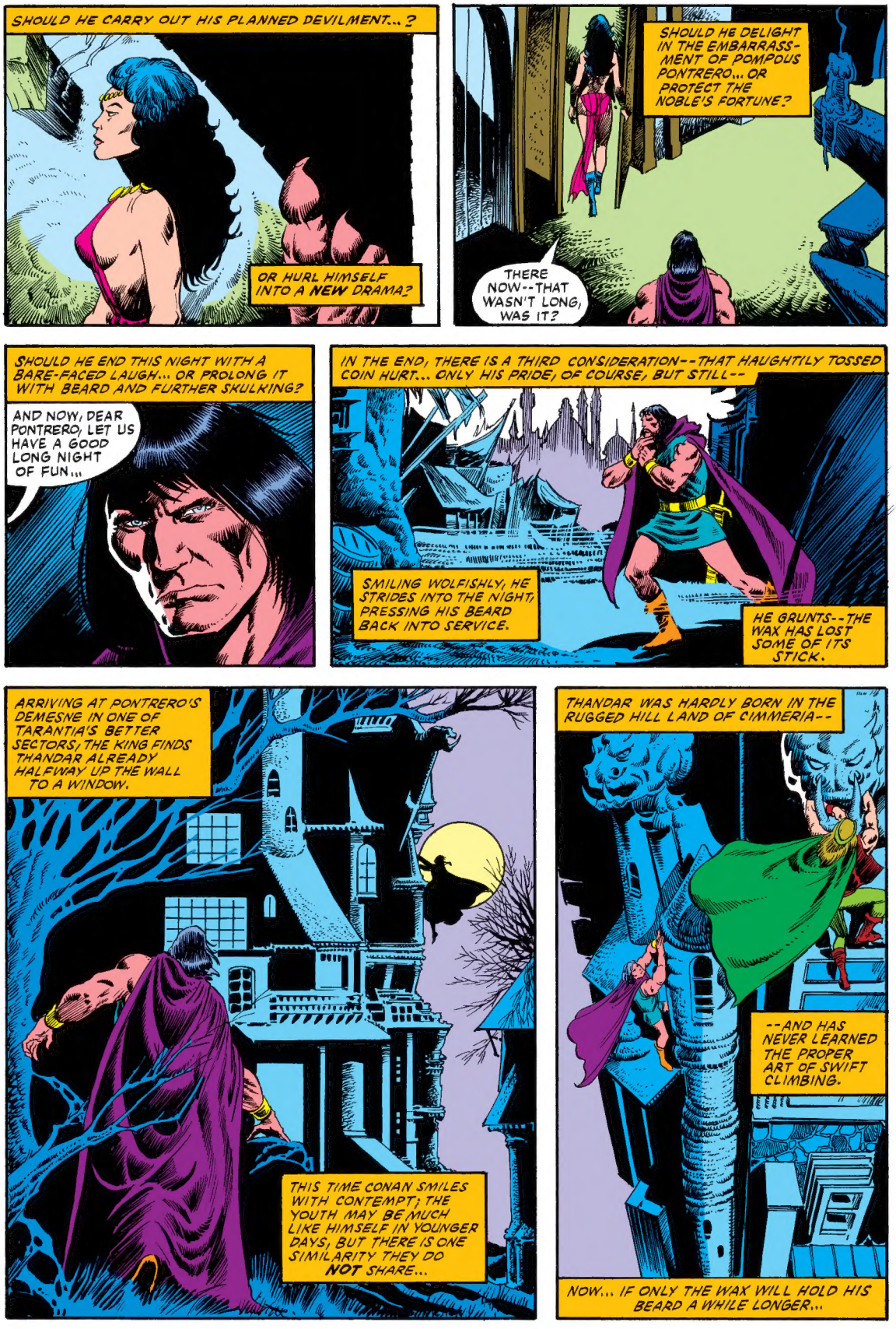

INSTEAD, QUICKLY BUT CALMLY GATHERING UP CLOAK AND SWORD, HE HEADS FOR THE DOOR AND THE NIGHT.
CONAN FROWNS OVER THE SMALL MYSTERY, THEN SHRUGS--MAYHAP HE WAS WRONG ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THANDAR AND BRISSA...

AND NOW A GRIN SPLITS HIS HORSEHAIR BEARD AS A BIT OF DEVILMENT COMES TO MIND...
AYE-- IN COURT, PONTRERO HAS EVER PLAYED THE PROPER AND POMPOUS ASS; DISDAINING CONAN'S LACK OF CIVILIZED GRACE IN A BID TO ADVANCE HIS OWN POLITICAL AMBITIONS.

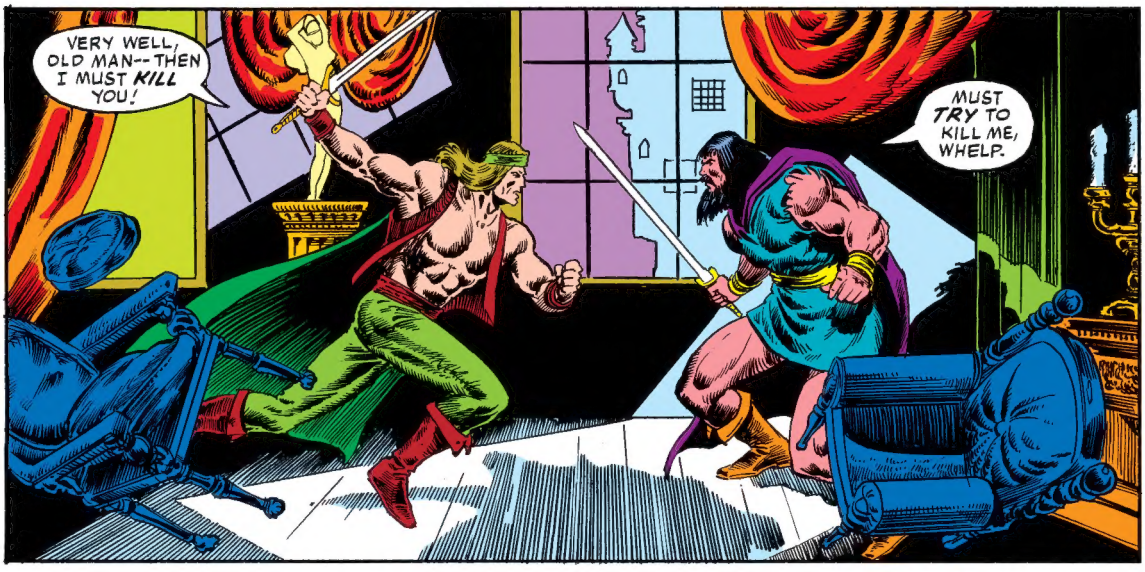
AND TO SURPRISE THE PRIG NOW, IN THE ARMS OF A CHEAP TAVERN WENCH...!

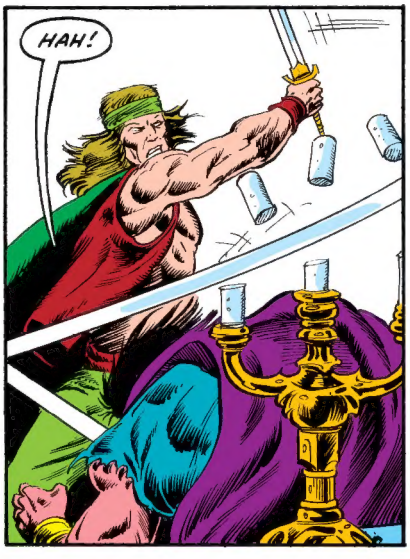

AYE-- IT WILL MAKE A GOOD STORY, AT LEAST, TO TELL ZENOBIA AND TROCERO BACK AT THE PALACE...


BUT AS CONAN PEELS HIS FALSE BEARD-- BETTER TO CRASH IN AS THE OUTRAGED KING THAN AS A FELLOW SKULKER IN DISGUISE-- HE FREEZES...
...HEARING FOOTFALLS FROM BEHIND THE NEARER DOOR.
IT WILL BE BUT A MOMENT, MY LORD--I MUST SIMPLY PREPARE FOR YOU, THAT IS ALL...
HE SLIDES BACK INTO SHADOW AS BRISSA EMERGES--AND HEADS FOR THE REAR EXIT.
EH--? WHAT MANNER OF "PREPARATION" IS THIS?
STEALTHILY, HE FOLLOWS HER...
TONIGHT IS THE NIGHT, THANDAR--ALL IS CLEAR!
PONTRERO'S WIFE IS OFF VISITING HER SISTER AND HAS TAKEN MOST OF THE SERVANTS, LEAVING BUT A FEW BEHIND.
HAH! THEN SOON WE SHALL BASK IN THE GLINT OF GOLD, BRISSA...
CONAN'S EYES NARROW--HE WAS NOT MISTAKEN, THEN, ABOUT THEIR RELATIONSHIP...
FAREWELL, BRISSA...
WASTE NOT YOUR LIPS TOO MUCH ON THAT FAT FOOL!
BUT WHAT NOW--?


SHOULD HE CARRY OUT HIS PLANNED DEVILMENT...?
OR HURL HIMSELF INTO A NEW DRAMA?
SHOULD HE DELIGHT IN THE EMBARRASSMENT OF POMPOUS PONTRERO... OR PROTECT THE NOBLE'S FORTUNE?
THERE NOW--THAT WASN'T LONG, WAS IT?
SHOULD HE END THIS NIGHT WITH A BARE-FACED LAUGH... OR PROLONG IT WITH BEARD AND FURTHER SKULKING?
AND NOW, DEAR PONTRERO, LET US HAVE A GOOD LONG NIGHT OF FUN...
IN THE END, THERE IS A THIRD CONSIDERATION--THAT HAUGHTILY TOSSED COIN HURT... ONLY HIS PRIDE, OF COURSE, BUT STILL--
SMILING WOLFISHLY, HE STRIDES INTO THE NIGHT, PRESSING HIS BEARD BACK INTO SERVICE.
HE GRUNTS--THE WAX HAS LOST SOME OF ITS STICK.
ARRIVING AT PONTRERO'S DEMESNE IN ONE OF TARANTIA'S BETTER SECTORS, THE KING FINDS THANDAR ALREADY HALFWAY UP THE WALL TO A WINDOW.
THIS TIME CONAN SMILES WITH CONTEMPT; THE YOUTH MAY BE MUCH LIKE HIMSELF IN YOUNGER DAYS, BUT THERE IS ONE SIMILARITY THEY DO NOT SHARE...
THANDAR WAS HARDLY BORN IN THE RUGGED HILL LAND OF CIMMERIA--
--AND HAS NEVER LEARNED THE PROPER ART OF SWIFT CLIMBING.
NOW... IF ONLY THE WAX WILL HOLD HIS BEARD A WHILE LONGER...

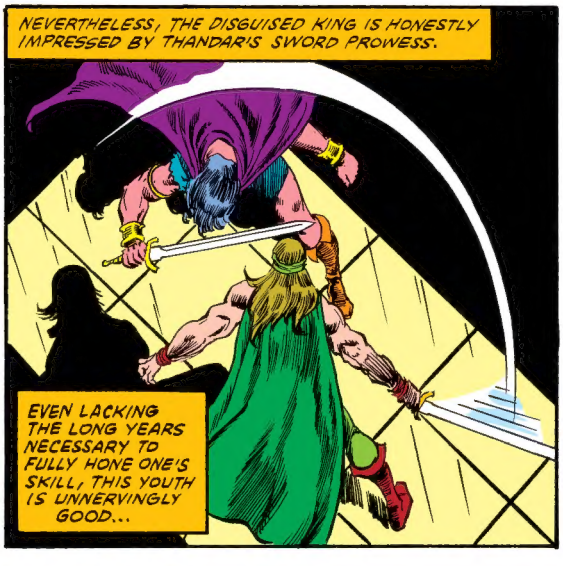
AFTER MUCH LABORIOUS EFFORT, THANDAR FINALLY CLAMBERS THROUGH AN OPEN WINDOW.
HE GIVES HIS EYES A MOMENT IN THE DEEPER GLOOM, THEN CREEPS TOWARD THE ALLURING CASK ON THE TABLE--JUST WHERE BRISSA SAID IT WOULD BE.
BUT WHEN HIS TREMBLING HANDS REACH OUT FOR IT...
EH--?!
THAT'S FAR ENOUGH, THIEF!
WHO--?!
LET'S JUST SAY I'M THE GUARDIAN OF THE KINGDOM'S TREASURES, WHELP.
YOU AGAIN! YOU FOLLOWED ME--DETERMINED TO SEE HOW YOU'D FARE IN A FIGHT!
BUT LISTEN TO ME, OLD MAN--THIS IS NO TIME TO CHASE YOUR LOST YOUTH! THERE IS MORE AT STAKE HERE THAN YOU CAN DREAM!
YOU'D BE SURPRISED, BOY, BY WHAT I'VE DREAMT.
LOOK--YOU BEAT ME FAIRLY AT ARM-STRENGTH. I ADMIT IT.
AND WERE YOU YOUNGER MAYHAP YOU'D EVEN BEAT ME IN A FIGHT.
NOW, ARE YOU SATISFIED?
NO, BECAUSE I AM NOT YOUNGER.
ALL RIGHT! YOU'D DEFEAT ME EVEN NOW--EVEN AT YOUR AGE! NOW LEAVE--LET ME FINISH MY WORK!
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND, THIEF, BUT THEN, YOUTH SELDOM DOES.
IT'S NOT MY AGE I WISH TO HALT-- IT'S YOU AND YOUR "WORK."

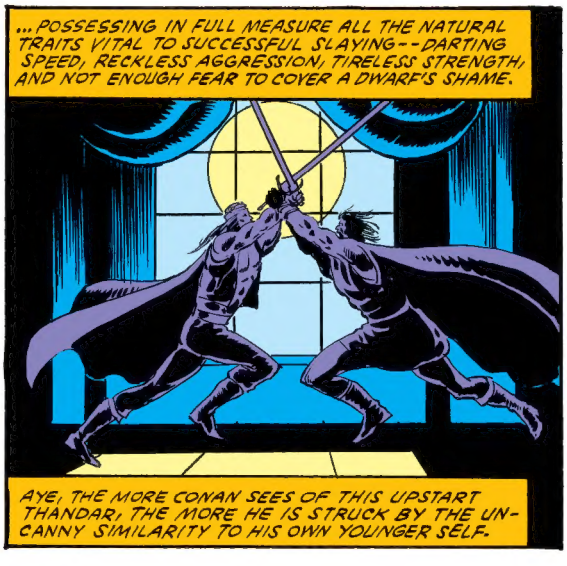

VERY WELL, OLD MAN--THEN I MUST KILL YOU!
MUST TRY TO KILL ME, WHELP.


HAH!

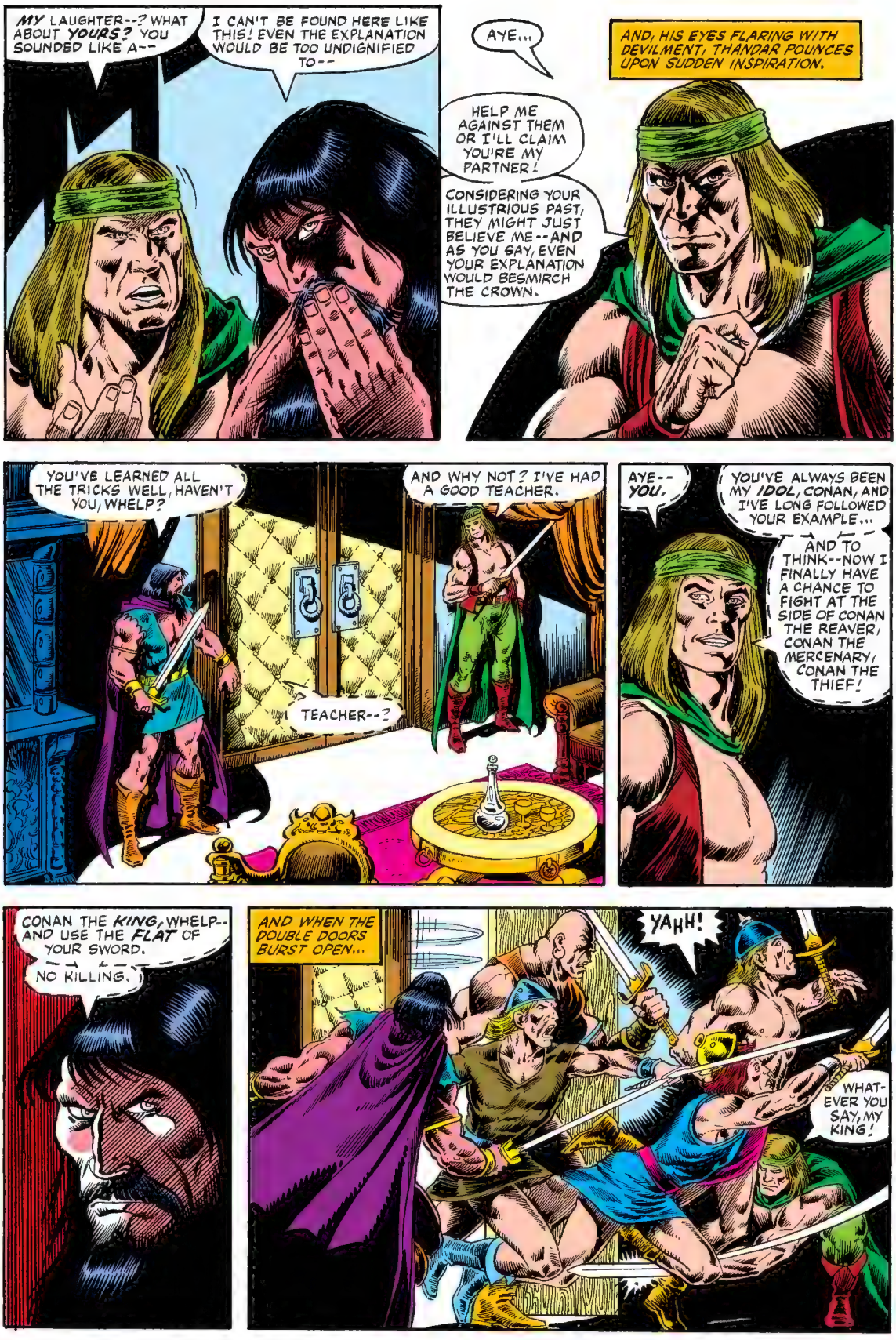
THE TWO ENDEAVORS, YOU'LL SOON SEE--

--ARE HARDLY THE SAME!


NEVERTHELESS, THE DISGUISED KING IS HONESTLY IMPRESSED BY THANDAR'S SWORD PROWESS.
EVEN LACKING THE LONG YEARS NECESSARY TO FULLY HONE ONE'S SKILL, THIS YOUTH IS UNNERVINGLY GOOD...

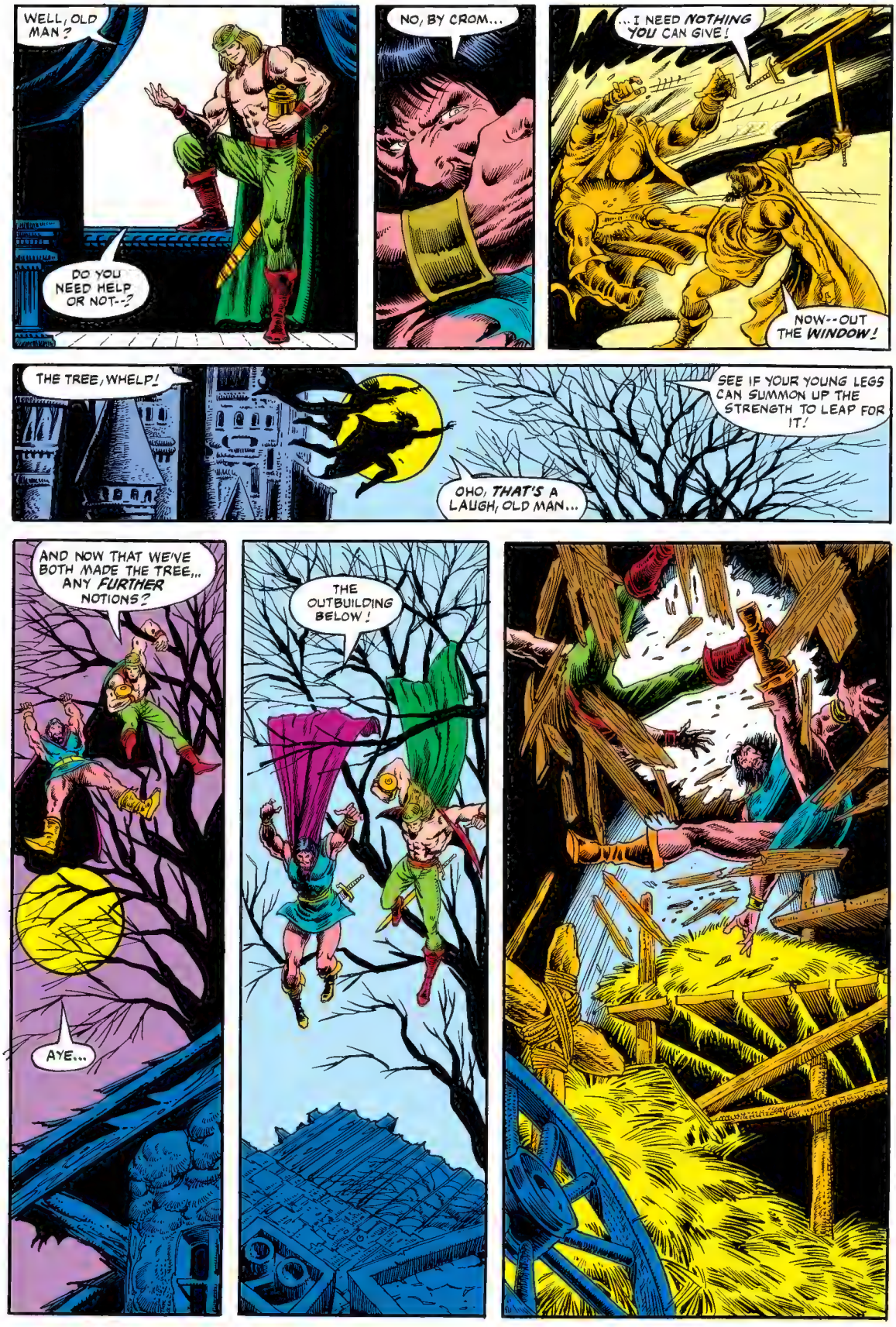

...POSSESSING IN FULL MEASURE ALL THE NATURAL TRAITS VITAL TO SUCCESSFUL SLAYING--DARTING SPEED, RECKLESS AGGRESSION, TIRELESS STRENGTH, AND NOT ENOUGH FEAR TO COVER A DWARF'S SHAME.
AYE, THE MORE CONAN SEES OF THIS UPSTART THANDAR, THE MORE HE IS STRUCK BY THE UNCANNY SIMILARITY TO HIS OWN YOUNGER SELF.

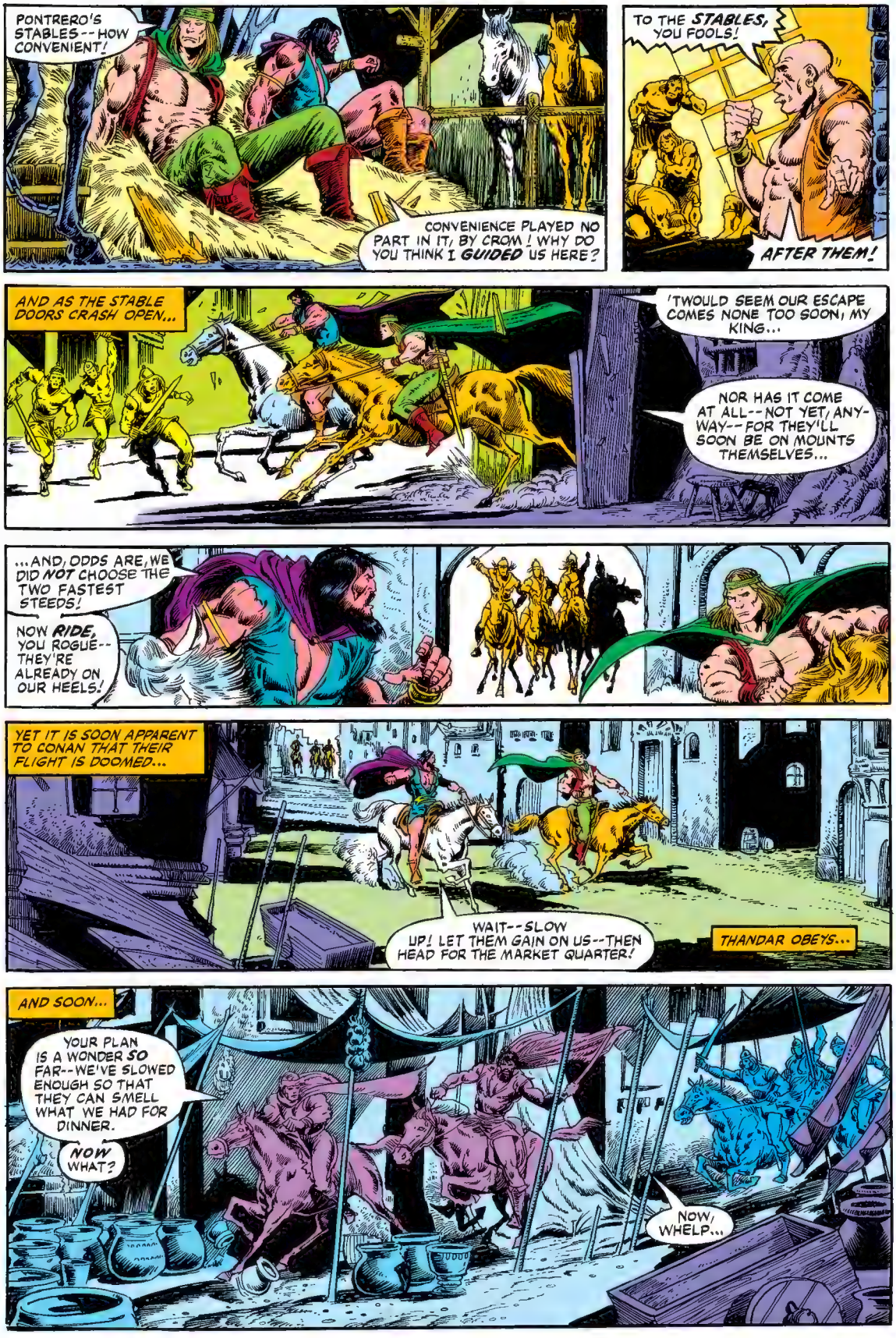
FINALLY THEY GRAPPLE--
--AND WHEN THANDAR'S ROUGH HAND GOUGES CONAN'S FACE...
EH--?
A FALSE BEARD--?!
MITRA! YOU... YOU'RE THE KING!
YOU'RE CONAN--KING OF AQUILONIA!
BUT THANDAR'S INCREDULITY DIES ABORNING...
... AND EXPLODES INTO UNBRIDLED MIRTH.
HA
HA HA HA HA
WHAT'S SO FUNNY WHELP?
YOU! CURSING ME FOR A THIEF--WHEN YOU WERE PERHAPS THE GREATEST THIEF WHO EVER SLIPPED THROUGH SHADOW!
THE CUTPURSES OF THE BACK ALLEYS STILL WHISPER YOUR NAME IN REVERENCE--
--POINTING TO THE SPIRES OF THE VERY PALACE AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE HEIGHTS TO WHICH A THIEF MAY ASPIRE!
WHY, YOU... YOU EVEN FINANCED YOUR TAKEOVER OF THE CROWN BY LOOTING THE TREASURE OF TRANICOS!
YOU... HAVE A POINT, THIEF...
AND, DESPITE HIMSELF, CONAN SMILES...
...THEN GUFFAWS WITH EVEN MORE ZEST THAN THANDAR CAN SUMMON.
HA HA HA HA HA
WAIT! WHAT'S THAT?
THE SERVANTS! YOUR CURSED GIGGLING HAS ROUSED THEM, YOU WET-NOSED FOOL!
BTUMP


MY LAUGHTER--? WHAT ABOUT YOURS? YOU SOUNDED LIKE A--
I CAN'T BE FOUND HERE LIKE THIS! EVEN THE EXPLANATION WOULD BE TOO UNDIGNIFIED TO--
AYE...
HELP ME AGAINST THEM OR I'LL CLAIM YOU'RE MY PARTNER!
CONSIDERING YOUR ILLUSTRIOUS PAST, THEY MIGHT JUST BELIEVE ME--AND AS YOU SAY, EVEN YOUR EXPLANATION WOULD BESMIRCH THE CROWN.
AND, HIS EYES FLARING WITH DEVILMENT, THANDAR POUNCES UPON SUDDEN INSPIRATION.
YOU'VE LEARNED ALL THE TRICKS WELL, HAVEN'T YOU, WHELP?
AND WHY NOT? I'VE HAD A GOOD TEACHER.
TEACHER--?
AYE-- YOU,
YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN MY IDOL, CONAN, AND I'VE LONG FOLLOWED YOUR EXAMPLE...
AND TO THINK--NOW I FINALLY HAVE A CHANCE TO FIGHT AT THE SIDE OF CONAN THE REAVER, CONAN THE MERCENARY, CONAN THE THIEF!
CONAN THE KING, WHELP-- AND USE THE FLAT OF YOUR SWORD.
NO KILLING.
AND WHEN THE DOUBLE DOORS BURST OPEN...
YAHH!
WHAT-EVER YOU SAY, MY KING!

"KING"--?!
JUST A JOKE, FRIEND.
A MERE JEST,
A JEST, EH?
WELL, BEARDED ONE... I'M NOT LAUGHING.
I SUPPOSE NOT...
... BUT THEN, NEITHER IS YOUR FRIEND HERE.
MAYHAP HE MADE A MISTAKE?
GRRR
QUIT TALKING, MY KING, AND START FIGHTING! THE BIG BALD ONE IS YOURS--I'LL TAKE THE ONE WITH THE HELMET!
YOU'LL TAKE ME, ALL RIGHT, BRAGGART! BUT YOU'LL ALSO TAKE THE POINT OF MY--

...MY...
...SWORD...
NOW! DON'T JUST STAND THERE GRINNING!
OUT THE WINDOW WHILE YOU CAN, FOOL!
ARE YOU NOT FORGETTING SOMETHING, MY PARTNER IN CRIME?
OUT THE WINDOW INDEED...
...BUT NOT WITHOUT TAKING WHAT WE CAME FOR.
AND NOW THAT WE HAVE THE ORNATE CASK IN QUESTION...
...ANY TIME YOU'RE READY, MY FELLOW THIEF.
OR DO YOUR OLD BONES REQUIRE SOME AID AGAINST THAT HAIRLESS APE?
MURRRGHH--!


WELL, OLD MAN?
DO YOU NEED HELP OR NOT--?
NO, BY CROM...
...I NEED NOTHING YOU CAN GIVE!
NOW--OUT THE WINDOW!
THE TREE, WHELP!
SEE IF YOUR YOUNG LEGS CAN SUMMON UP THE STRENGTH TO LEAP FOR IT!
OHO, THAT'S A LAUGH, OLD MAN...
AND NOW THAT WE'VE BOTH MADE THE TREE,.. ANY FURTHER NOTIONS?
AYE...
THE OUTBUILDING BELOW!


PONTRERO'S STABLES--HOW CONVENIENT!
CONVENIENCE PLAYED NO PART IN IT, BY CROM! WHY DO YOU THINK I GUIDED US HERE?
TO THE STABLES, YOU FOOLS!
AFTER THEM!
AND AS THE STABLE DOORS CRASH OPEN...
'TWOULD SEEM OUR ESCAPE COMES NONE TOO SOON, MY KING...
NOR HAS IT COME AT ALL--NOT YET, ANYWAY--FOR THEY'LL SOON BE ON MOUNTS THEMSELVES...
...AND, ODDS ARE, WE DID NOT CHOOSE THE TWO FASTEST STEEDS!
NOW RIDE, YOU ROGUE--THEY'RE ALREADY ON OUR HEELS!
YET IT IS SOON APPARENT TO CONAN THAT THEIR FLIGHT IS DOOMED...
WAIT--SLOW UP! LET THEM GAIN ON US--THEN HEAD FOR THE MARKET QUARTER!
THANDAR OBEYS...
AND SOON...
YOUR PLAN IS A WONDER SO FAR--WE'VE SLOWED ENOUGH SO THAT THEY CAN SMELL WHAT WE HAD FOR DINNER.
NOW WHAT?
NOW, WHELP...

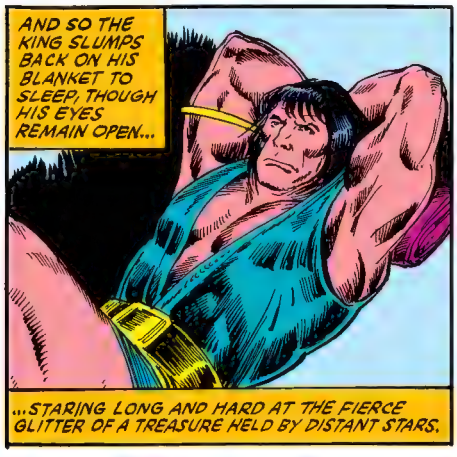
...THE CHASE...
... ENDS!
YAHH!
KEEP GOING! RIDE FOR THE HILLS BEYOND THE CITY!
DO YOU THINK IT WAS CONVINCING ENOUGH?
AYE... AND MADE ALL THE MORE SO BY THE FACT THERE WERE TWO OF THEM.
BUT WHO, I WONDER, WAS THE OTHER ONE?
IN THE WOODED HILLS A SAFE DISTANCE BEYOND TARANTIA...
I KNEW THERE WAS GOOD REASON TO CHOOSE YOU AS MY IDOL, CONAN.
AYE-- IT WAS GOOD SPORT, I'LL GIVE IT THAT-- ESPECIALLY FOR A NIGHT I FIGURED TO HOLD NO MORE THAN THE ENJOYMENT OF A FEW ALES.
EVEN SO, IT FEELS SO GOOD TO BE RID OF THAT CURSED BEARD.
NOW LET'S HAVE A LOOK AT YOUR TREASURE...
THE CASK? OH, BUT IT'S NOT TREASURE, CONAN.
EH--? THEN WHAT--?
SEED CONES--?!
SEED CONES--?!
AYE--FROM THE JUBLA TREE--AND THEY ARE THE MEANS TO A TREASURE.
OF COURSE THEY ARE. WHAT ELSE WOULD THEY BE?
JEST IF YOU LIKE... BUT KNOW YOU OF THE HIDDEN ONES?
AYE-- I'VE EVEN MET SOME OF THEM.

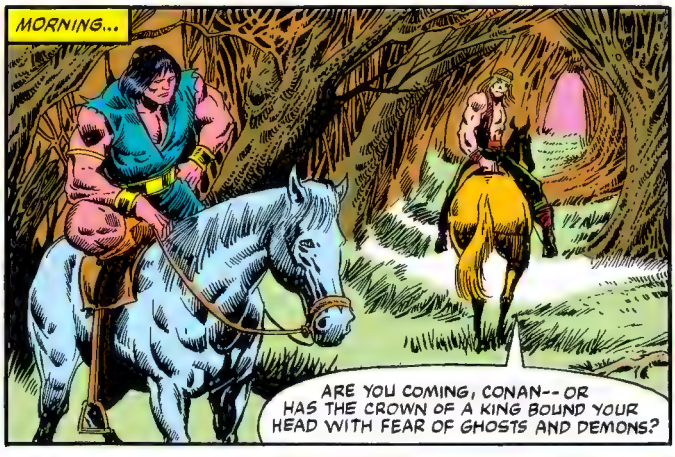
IT'S THE OLDEST CULT OF THEM ALL--THE USERS OF THE FLAME KNIFE.
MEN OF MANY LANDS AND ALL RACES BELONGED TO THE CULT OF THE HIDDEN ONES--IT LIES BEHIND THE WORSHIP OF MITRA, ISHTAR, AND ASURA.
IT DOES--?
AYE, THE HIDDEN ONES SWAYED THE DESTINIES OF EMPIRES...
...NOT BY LEADING ARMIES INTO THE FIELD, BUT BY POISON AND FIRE AND THE FLAME-BLADED DAGGER THAT BIT IN THE DARK.
YOU ARE RICH IN EXPERIENCE, CONAN--I SEE I HAVE MUCH CATCHING UP TO DO IF EVER I HOPE TO RIVAL YOUR EXAMPLE.
ANYWAY, TWO DAYS EAST OF HERE IT IS SAID THERE LIE RUINS ONCE BELONGING TO THE CULT--THE TEMPLE OF R'SHANN...
...AND THE RUINS OF THIS TEMPLE, IT IS FURTHER SAID, STILL HOARD A FABULOUS TREASURE.
NOT LOOTED AFTER ALL THESE CENTURIES?
CROM'S HELL, BOY, YOU BELIEVE SUCH AN ADDLED LEGEND?
THE RUINS ARE HAUNTED BY SUPERNATURAL FORCES GUARDING THE TREASURE--AND SMALL WONDER THEY'VE YET TO BE PLUNDERED! BUT THE SMOKE OF THESE SEED CONES CONTROLS THOSE FORCES--PUTS THEM TO REST!
IN THE MORNING I SET OUT FOR THE RUINS--TO BURN THESE CONES AND CLAIM THE TREASURE!
AND DESPITE HIMSELF, CONAN IS SLIGHTLY AWED...
YOU BELIEVE THIS TO BE TRUE--ABOUT THE SUPER-NATURAL FORCES--
--AND YOU PLAN TO DEFY THEM?
OF COURSE--WITH THESE CONES. HOW ELSE COULD I CLAIM THE TREASURE?
AND WHY NOT JOIN ME, CONAN? WE COULD SHARE THE LOOT...
I'D EVEN GIVE YOU A THIRD.

NO... I COULDN'T DO SUCH A THING.
WHY NOT? YOU'VE DONE THINGS FAR MORE DARING IN THE PAST.
BUT I'M THE KING NOW.

AYE... BUT, TOO, I THINK YOU ARE STILL CONAN.
GOOD NIGHT.
AND KING SIMPLY STARES AT YOUTH...

MUCH LIKE HIMSELF THIS THANDAR MAY BE, BUT THERE IS ONE CRUCIAL WAY IN WHICH THEIR NATURES PART. CONAN WOULD NEVER SAY SO ALOUD, BUT ANY-ONE WHO WILLINGLY SEEKS OUT THE SUPERNATURAL IS MORE THAN COURAGEOUS...
...HE IS A FOOL.


AND SO THE KING SLUMPS BACK ON HIS BLANKET TO SLEEP, THOUGH HIS EYES REMAIN OPEN...
...STARING LONG AND HARD AT THE FIERCE GLITTER OF A TREASURE HELD BY DISTANT STARS.

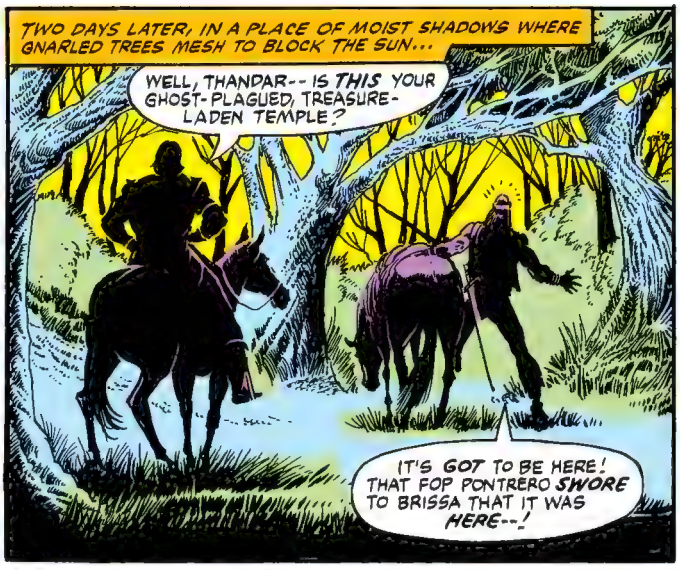

MORNING...
ARE YOU COMING, CONAN-- OR HAS THE CROWN OF A KING BOUND YOUR HEAD WITH FEAR OF GHOSTS AND DEMONS?

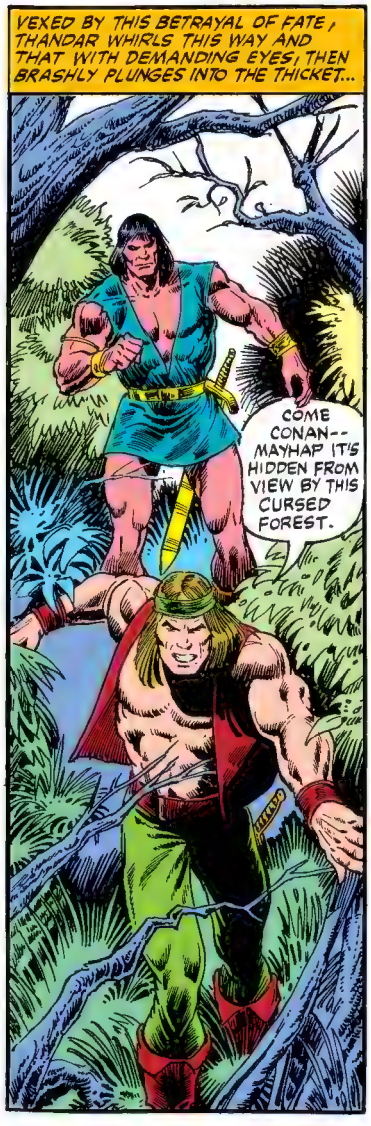
CONAN LOOKS BACK IN THE DIRECTION OF TARANTIA, WHERE AWAIT HIS QUEEN ZENOBIA AND HIS SON CONN...

AND WHERE, TOO, AWAIT ALL THE DULL AND TEDIOUS CHORES OF A SEDATE KINGDOM'S MONARCH...

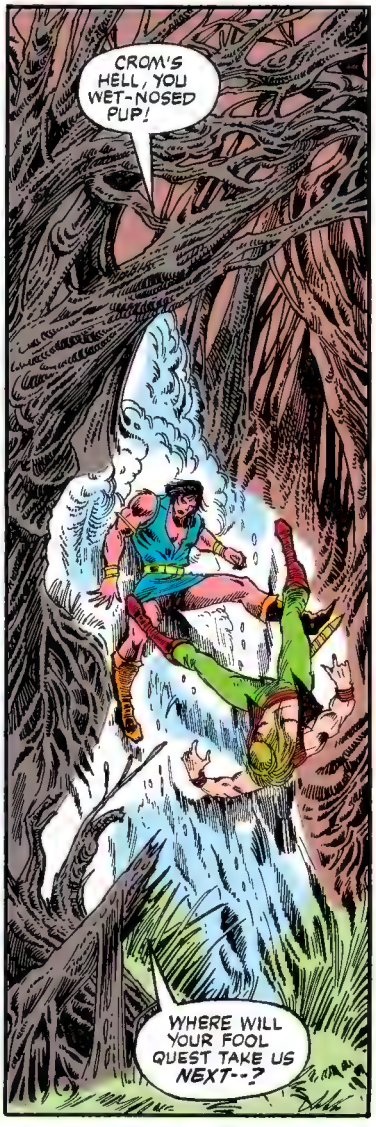
WHY NOT? IF A RAW YOUTH LIKE THANDAR CAN DARE THE DARK FORCES OF SOME PRIMORDIAL SHADOW-HAUNTED TOMB...
...THEN HE, CERTAINLY, CAN DO NO LESS.
WAIT UP, WHELP-- AND DON'T BE IN SUCH A HURRY TO FEED YOUR BLOOD TO DEMONS.

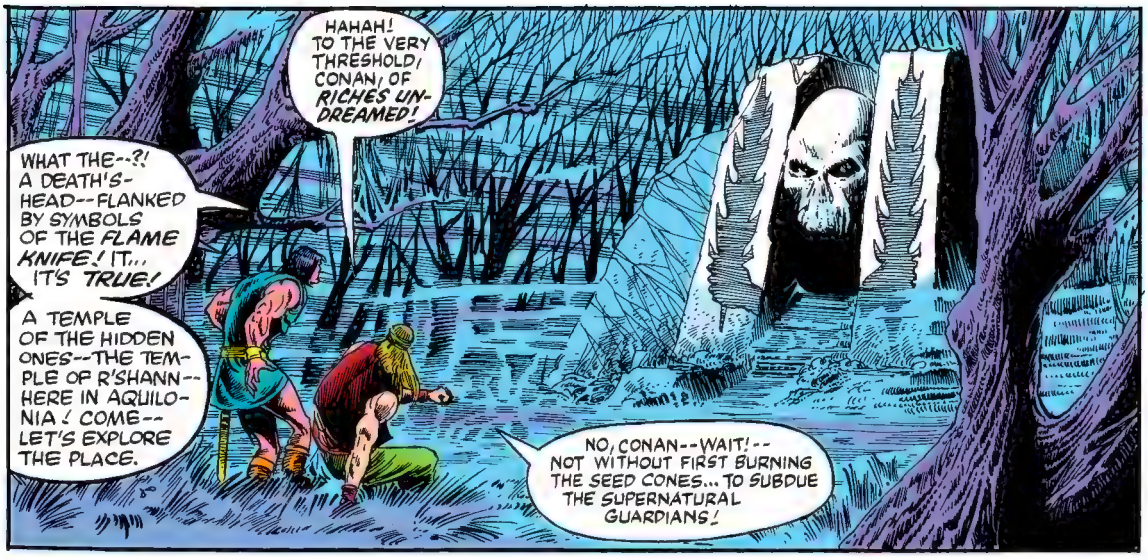
HAH! I KNEW MY IDOL WOULD NOT DISAPPOINT ME! AND NOW, CONAN--
--WE RIDE TO LUSTY ADVENTURE!
HNH!


TWO DAYS LATER, IN A PLACE OF MOIST SHADOWS WHERE GNARLED TREES MESH TO BLOCK THE SUN...
WELL, THANDAR-- IS THIS YOUR GHOST-PLAGUED, TREASURE-LADEN TEMPLE?
IT'S GOT TO BE HERE! THAT POP PONTRERO SWORE TO BRISSA THAT IT WAS HERE--!


VEXED BY THIS BETRAYAL OF FATE, THANDAR WHIRLS THIS WAY AND THAT WITH DEMANDING EYES, THEN BRASHLY PLUNGES INTO THE THICKET...
COME CONAN-- MAYHAP IT'S HIDDEN FROM VIEW BY THIS CURSED FOREST.

NO DOUBT YOU'RE RIGHT, THANDAR. AFTER ALL, IT IS A TEMPLE OF THE HIDDEN ONES, AND WHAT ELSE WOULD IT BE IF NOT HID--
YAAAAHH


CROM'S HELL, YOU WET-NOSED PUP!
WHERE WILL YOUR FOOL QUEST TAKE US NEXT--?


HAHAH! TO THE VERY THRESHOLD, CONAN, OF RICHES UNDREAMED!
WHAT THE--?! A DEATH'S-HEAD--FLANKED BY SYMBOLS OF THE FLAME KNIFE! IT... IT'S TRUE!
A TEMPLE OF THE HIDDEN ONES--THE TEMPLE OF R'SHANN--HERE IN AQUILONIA! COME--LET'S EXPLORE THE PLACE.
NO, CONAN--WAIT!--NOT WITHOUT FIRST BURNING THE SEED CONES... TO SUBDUE THE SUPERNATURAL GUARDIANS!

AND SO...
MORE WOOD, THANDAR, AND YOUR SACRIFICIAL FIRE WILL BE READY.
AYE, BUT SINCE THERE'S NO MORE KINDLING SCATTERED ON THE GROUND--

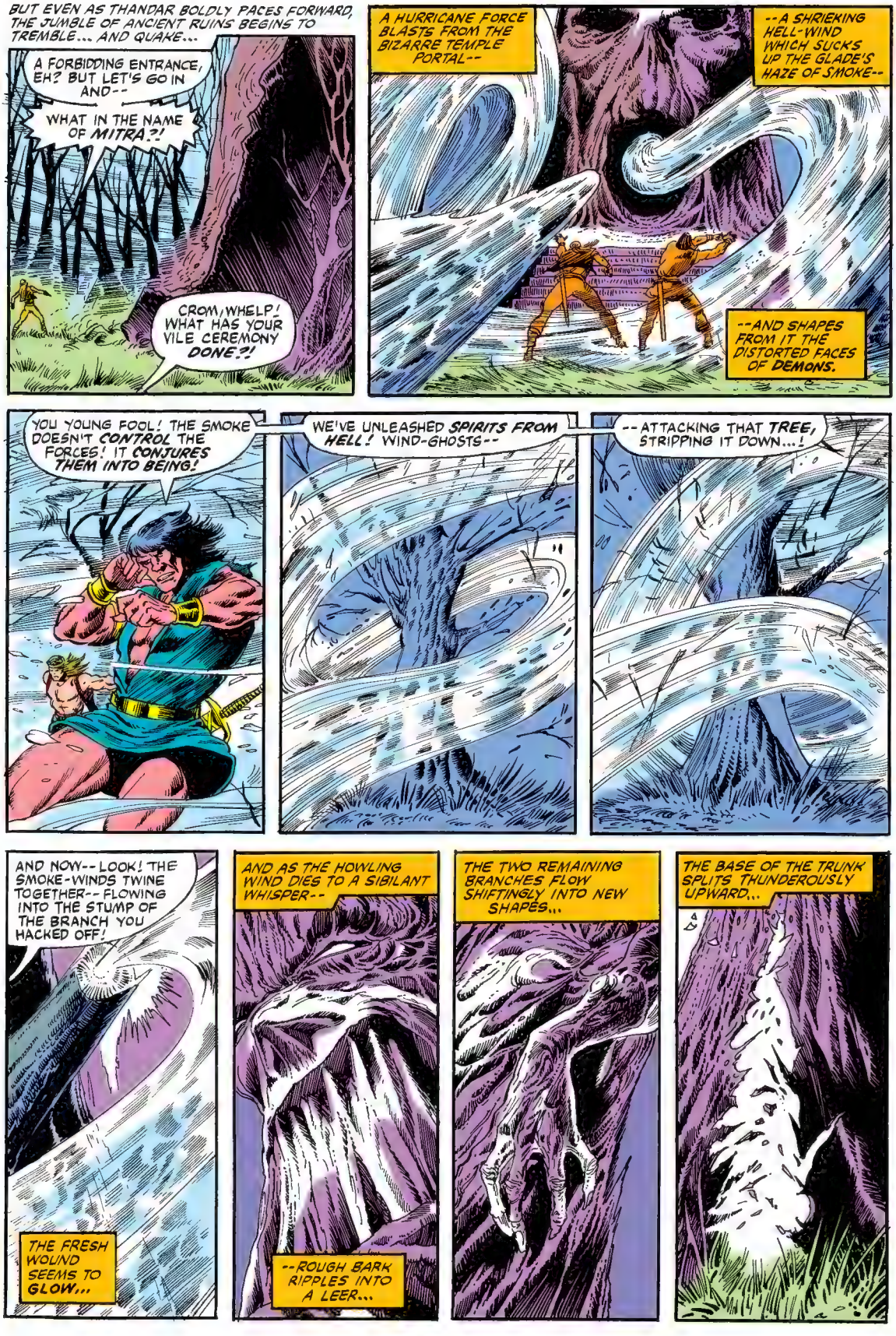
--THIS BRANCH WILL SIMPLY HAVE TO SURRENDER ITSELF IN OFFERING.
AND THE TREE SEEMS TO FLINCH, AS IF RECOILING IN PAIN.

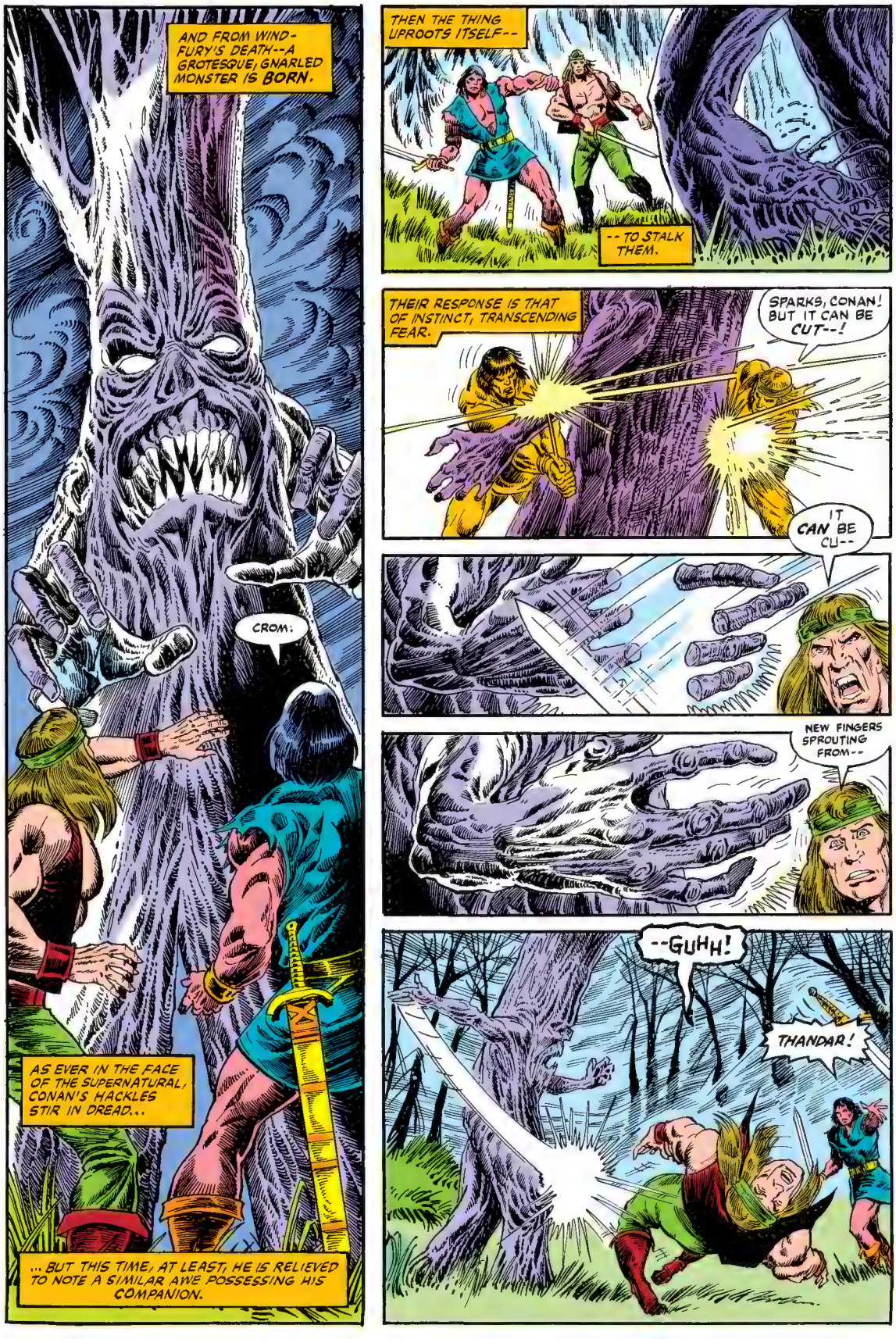
NO... IT COULDN'T BE...
JUST A TRICK OF THIS GLOOMY LIGHT...

EH--? WHAT DID YOU SAY?
AH... NOTHING, CONAN.
THIS SHOULD BE ENOUGH FUEL FOR THE FIRE...
NOW IF YOU'LL PASS ME PONTRERO'S CASK--

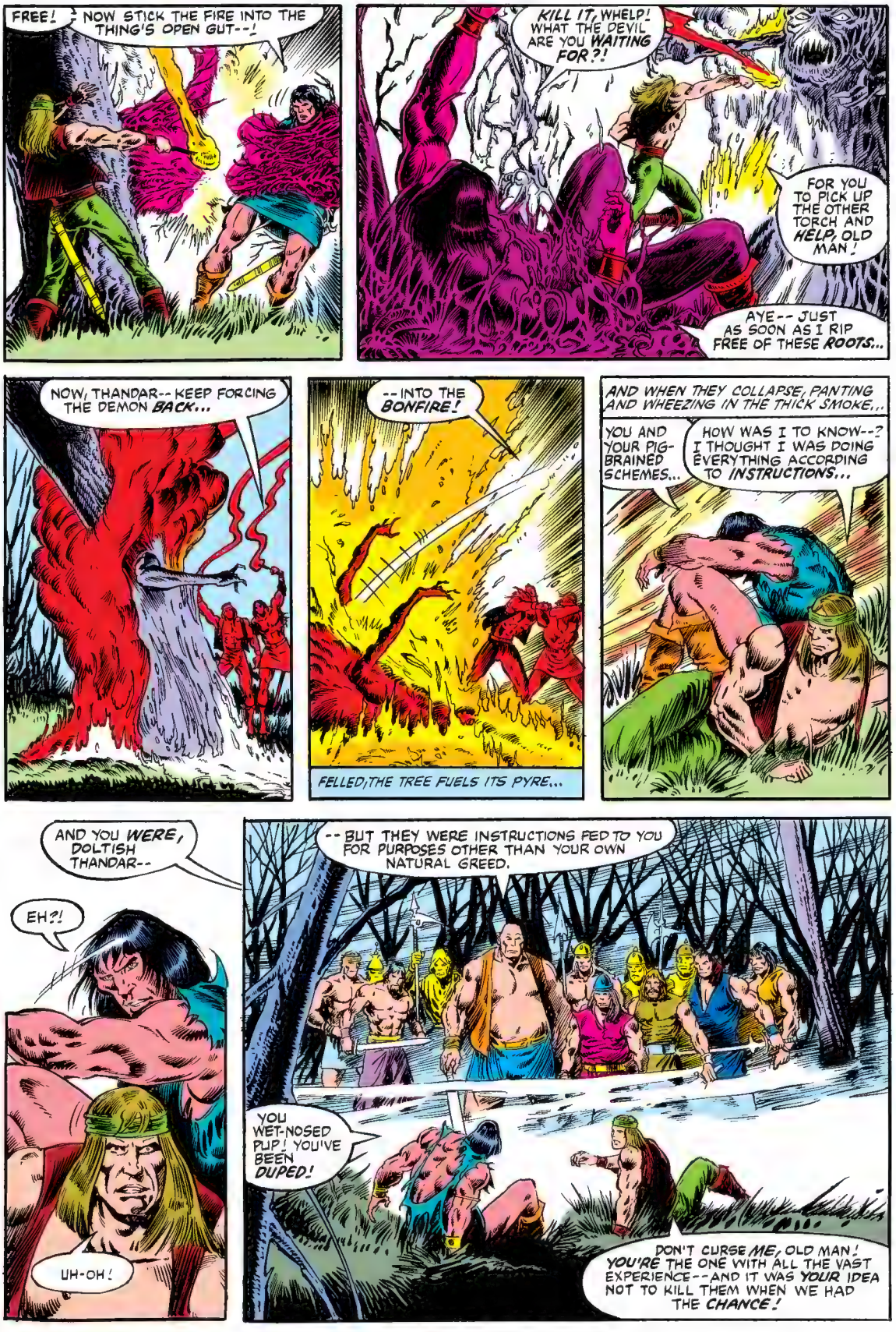
--WE CAN BURN THE SEED CONES.

AND, ALMOST AT ONCE...
WELL, THEY GIVE OFF ENOUGH SMOKE ALL RIGHT.
NOW WHAT?
THAT'S ALL. THE SMOKE MAKES IT SAFE TO ENTER THE TEMPLE...


BUT EVEN AS THANDAR BOLDLY PACES FORWARD, THE JUMBLE OF ANCIENT RUINS BEGINS TO TREMBLE... AND QUAKE...
A FORBIDDING ENTRANCE, EH? BUT LET'S GO IN AND--
WHAT IN THE NAME OF MITRA?!
CROM, WHELP! WHAT HAS YOUR VILE CEREMONY DONE?!
A HURRICANE FORCE BLASTS FROM THE BIZARRE TEMPLE PORTAL--
--A SHRIEKING HELL-WIND WHICH SUCKS UP THE GLADE'S HAZE OF SMOKE--
--AND SHAPES FROM IT THE DISTORTED FACES OF DEMONS.
YOU YOUNG FOOL! THE SMOKE DOESN'T CONTROL THE FORCES! IT CONJURES THEM INTO BEING!
WE'VE UNLEASHED SPIRITS FROM HELL! WIND-GHOSTS--
--ATTACKING THAT TREE, STRIPPING IT DOWN...!
AND NOW--LOOK! THE SMOKE-WINDS TWINE TOGETHER--FLOWING INTO THE STUMP OF THE BRANCH YOU HACKED OFF!
THE FRESH WOUND SEEMS TO GLOW...
AND AS THE HOWLING WIND DIES TO A SIBILANT WHISPER--
--ROUGH BARK RIPPLES INTO A LEER...
THE TWO REMAINING BRANCHES FLOW SHIFTINGLY INTO NEW SHAPES...
THE BASE OF THE TRUNK SPLITS THUNDEROUSLY UPWARD...


AND FROM WIND-FURY'S DEATH--A GROTESQUE, GNARLED MONSTER IS BORN.
CROM!
AS EVER IN THE FACE OF THE SUPERNATURAL, CONAN'S HACKLES STIR IN DREAD...
... BUT THIS TIME, AT LEAST, HE IS RELIEVED TO NOTE A SIMILAR AWE POSSESSING HIS COMPANION.
THEN THE THING UPROOTS ITSELF--
-- TO STALK THEM.
THEIR RESPONSE IS THAT OF INSTINCT, TRANSCENDING FEAR.
SPARKS, CONAN! BUT IT CAN BE CUT--!
IT CAN BE CU--
NEW FINGERS SPROUTING FROM--
--GUHH!
THANDAR!

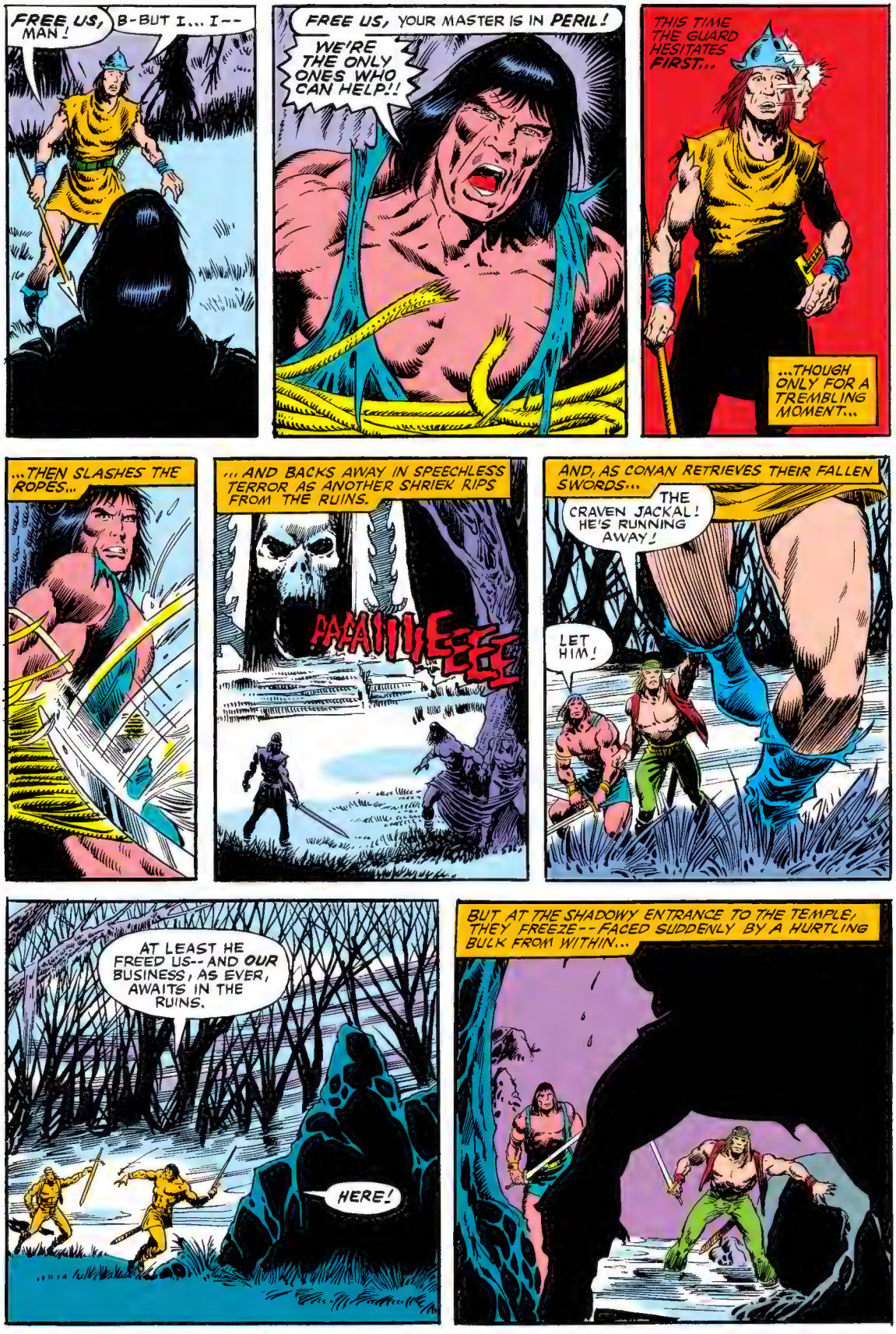
NOW CONAN STANDS ALONE AGAINST THE ARBOREAL DEMON.
FEAR POUNDS THROUGH HIS VEINS.
BUT SINCE FLIGHT IS UNTHINKABLE, HE SUMMONS HIS EVERY LAST RE-SERVE OF STRENGTH--
--AND ATTACKS THE THING.
ITS CHEST SPLITS OPEN, RIPELY...
...GUSHING FORTH A WET SPILL OF TENDRILS, STICKY WITH BLOOD-SAP.
GROPING, THE ROOT-MASS SEEKS AND CLUTCHES HIM, SNARES HIM, DRAGS HIM BACK TOWARD THE GAPING, OOZING RENT IN ITS TRUNK...
CONAN--!
IN THE NAME OF BLESSED MITRA, WHAT CAN--
THE FIRE, THANDAR! BURN THE THING!
BURN IT-- BEFORE IT SQUEEZES THE LIFE OUT OF ME!
SHAKING OFF HIS PAIN, THANDAR SNATCHES UP TWO FIREBRANDS...
HE CASTS ONE AT THE CREATURE'S BASE...
...THEN, WHEN IT SPASMS AND TWISTS IN GROANING PAIN--
--HE JAMS THE OTHER TORCH INTO THE MESH OF TENDRILS BINDING HIS IDOL.


FREE!
NOW STICK THE FIRE INTO THE THING'S OPEN GUT--!
KILL IT, WHELP! WHAT THE DEVIL ARE YOU WAITING FOR?!
FOR YOU TO PICK UP THE OTHER TORCH AND HELP, OLD MAN!
AYE-- JUST AS SOON AS I RIP FREE OF THESE ROOTS...
NOW, THANDAR-- KEEP FORCING THE DEMON BACK...
--INTO THE BONFIRE!
FELLED, THE TREE FUELS ITS PYRE...
AND WHEN THEY COLLAPSE, PANTING AND WHEEZING IN THE THICK SMOKE...
YOU AND YOUR PIG-BRAINED SCHEMES...
HOW WAS I TO KNOW--? I THOUGHT I WAS DOING EVERYTHING ACCORDING TO INSTRUCTIONS...
AND YOU WERE, DOLTISH THANDAR--
EH?!
UH-OH!
--BUT THEY WERE INSTRUCTIONS FED TO YOU FOR PURPOSES OTHER THAN YOUR OWN NATURAL GREED.
YOU WET-NOSED PUP! YOU'VE BEEN DUPED!
DON'T CURSE ME, OLD MAN! YOU'RE THE ONE WITH ALL THE VAST EXPERIENCE--AND IT WAS YOUR IDEA NOT TO KILL THEM WHEN WE HAD THE CHANCE!

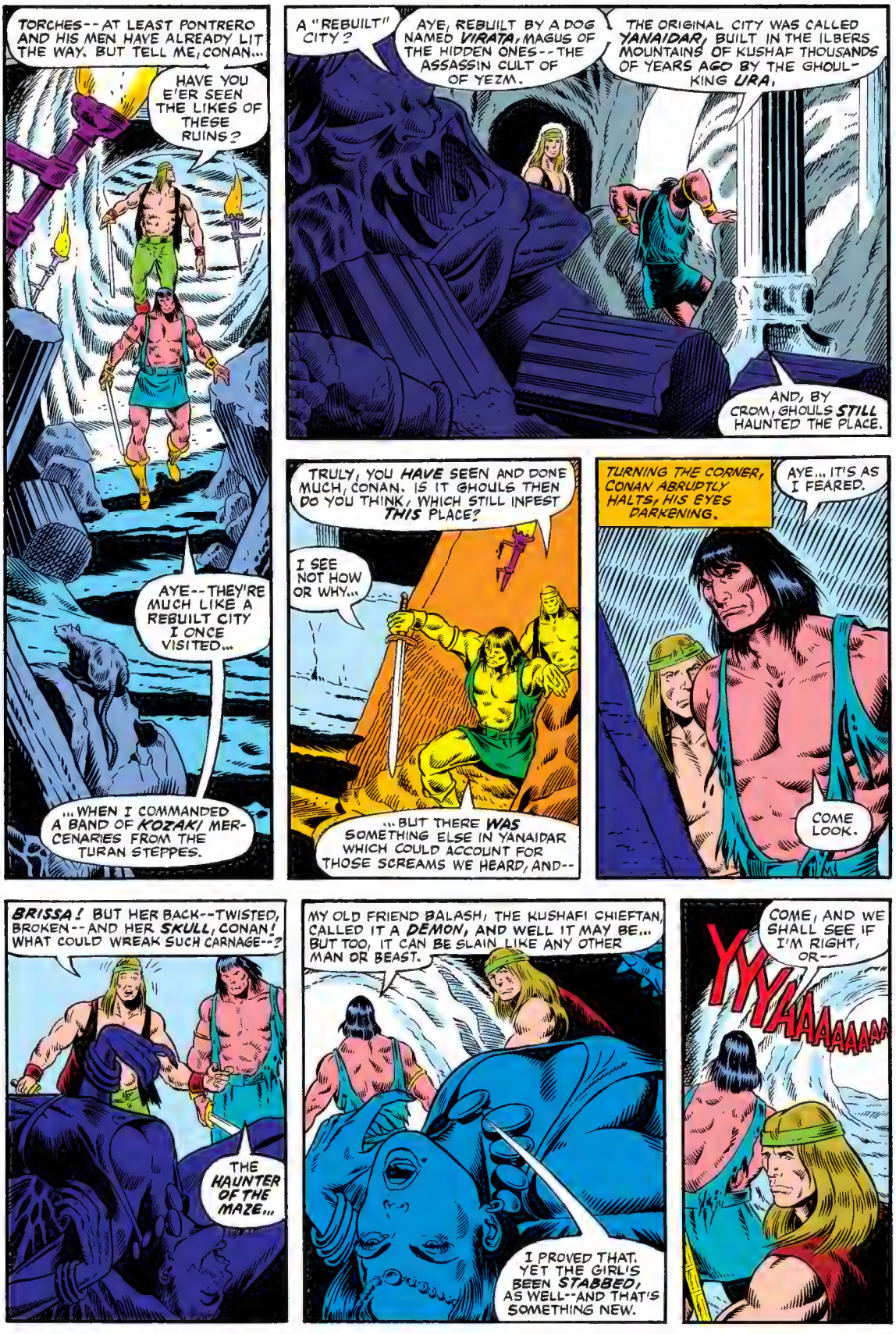
POOR THANDAR--YOU ALWAYS WERE TOO EASILY LED...
BRISSA--AND PONTRERO!
THEN YOU WERE PLAYING ME FOR A FOOL ALL ALONG--TO GET ME TO SLAY THE TREE DEMON FOR YOU...
OF COURSE, DEAR THANDAR--CLEARING A PATH TO THE TREASURE FOR US.
CURSE ME FOR AN ADDLE-PATED, LOVESICK CLOWN!
AYE--BUT SAY ONE WORD ABOUT FOLLOWING MY EXAMPLE AND I'LL GUT YOU FROM BELLY TO THROAT.
EH--? THAT VOICE! CONAN--? IS THAT YOU IN ALL THE SMOKE--THE KING?!
AYE, PONTRERO, IT'S ME--AND THIS CHARADE HAS GONE ON LONG ENOUGH.
AS YOUR KING, I DEMAND AN END TO IT.
HMMM...
AH... I'M AFRAID NOT, CONAN. INDEED, I THINK THE DRAMA SHOULD UNFOLD A TRIFLE FURTHER... MAYHAP EVEN TO A SURPRISE CLIMAX.
YOU OAFISH FOP! WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY--
I MEAN, BARBARIAN, THAT I CAN HARDLY PERMIT YOUR RETURN TO COURT WITH THE NEWS THAT I HAVE BECOME A COMMON LOOTER OF ANCIENT TEMPLES--
--A MANIPULATOR OF THIEVES--A LOVER OF LOWLY SERVING WENCHES...

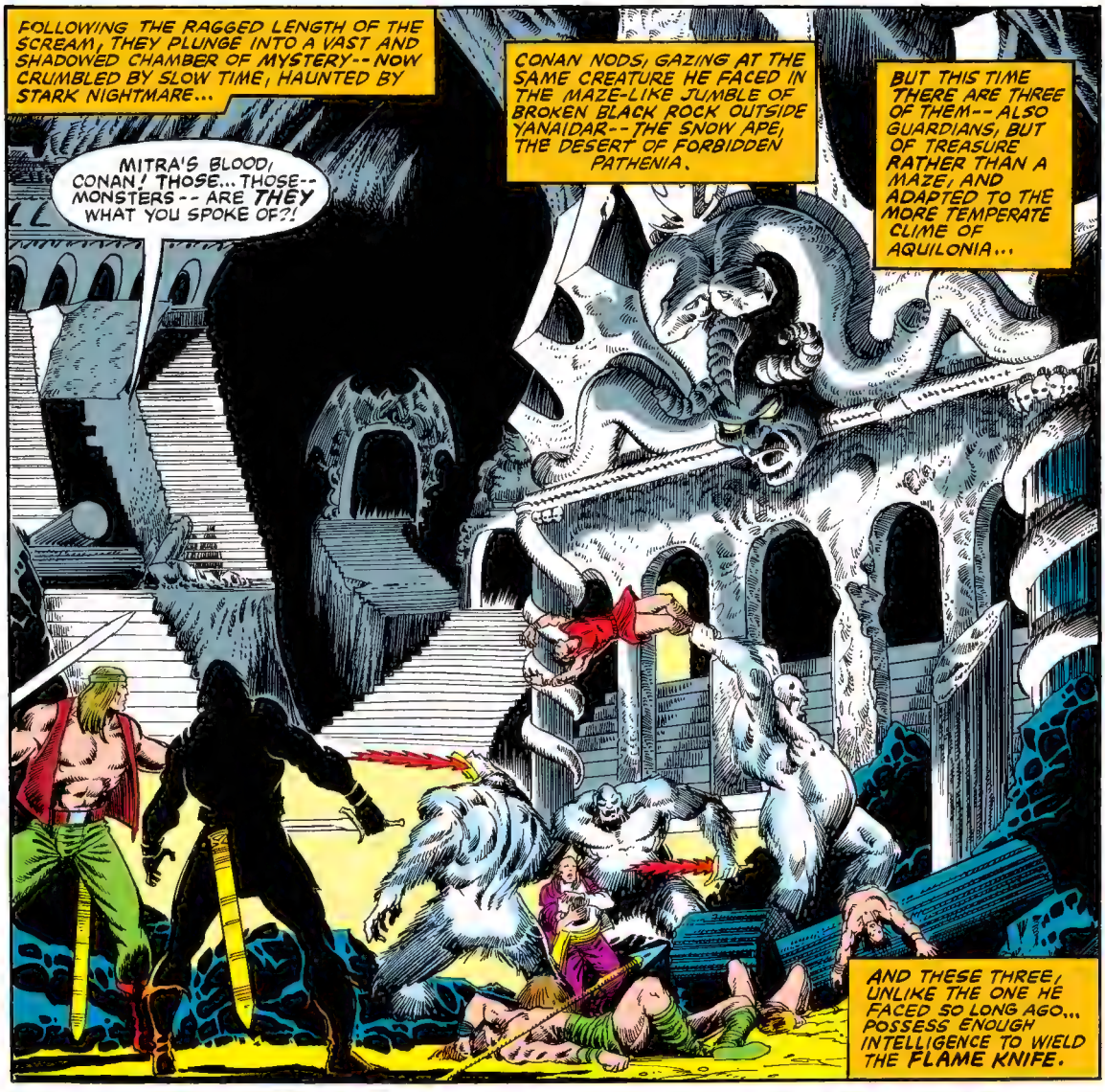
I WARN YOU, PONTRERO--THE JEST HAS GONE ON TOO LONG...
NOT FOR HE WHO WILL CLAIM THE LAST LAUGH, CONAN. YOU SEE, I MAY NEVER FIND ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY SUCH AS THIS... AND IT OCCURS TO ME THAT AQUILONIA MAY BE BETTER SERVED WITHOUT A BARBARIAN KING...
SMIRKING, PONTRERO PEELS AWAY HIS OWN DISGUISE...
AS FOR YOUR SUCCESSOR, I SEE YOU NOW A LIKELY CANDIDATE ANYWHERE IN THIS ANCIENT GLADE?
SEIZE HIM--BIND HIM TO A TREE--AND THE THIEF AS WELL!
I SHALL DECIDE HOW BEST TO DISPOSE OF HIM AFTER I'VE SEEN THE TREASURE.
TREACHEROUS DOG! I'LL--
SILENCE, BARBARIAN--LEST I ADD AGONY TO YOUR INDIGNITY.
AND NOW, WHILE MY DECISION WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY BE DEATH FOR YOU, CONAN, I MUST ADMIT THAT DISCREDITING YOU AS A COMMON THIEVING SAVAGE BEFORE ALL THE EYES OF THE COURT WOULD BE FAR MORE SATISFYING...
...AND I MAY YET CONCEIVE A WAY TO IMPLICATE YOU IN ALL THIS BUSINESS OF LOOTING...
...SAY, BY HAVING YOU CAUGHT WITH SOME OF THE STOLEN TREASURE--PROVIDED, OF COURSE, THERE IS ENOUGH TO SPARE.
AND WHEN PONTRERO AND HIS PARTY HAVE DISAPPEARED INTO THE RUINS...
THAT WITCH! SHE BETRAYED ME--FOR... FOR SOME YELLOW-EYED, WEAK-KNEED NOBLE!
NAY--FOR THE RICHES, THANDAR.
AND I GUESS SHE'S NO MORE GUILTY THAN YOU...
...OR AM I WRONG IN THINKING YOU USED HER LOVE AS A MEANS TO THE TREASURE?

NEVER MIND THAT! A COMMON TAVERN WENCH-- SHE'S HARDLY A GREAT LOSS! IT'S THAT LOOT I WANT!
TRY THINKING OF YOUR YOUNG LIFE, FIRST-- FOR EXAMPLE, HOW ARE YOU GOING TO GET US FREE?
ME--?! YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S CUT A BLOODY SWATH ACROSS THE ENTIRE HYBORIAN CONTINENT!
YOU'RE THE ONE WHO SLASHED THE CROWN RIGHT OFF THE TYRANT NUMENIDES' VERY HEAD--AND SEIZED HIS KINGDOM FOR YOUR OWN!
SURELY MERE ROPES CANNOT STIFLE YOUR OVERWHELMING LEGEND!
YOU'RE RIGHT, THANDAR. I AM, AFTER ALL, "MONARCH OF MIGHTY AQUILONIA"...
GUARD! AS YOUR KING, I COMMAND YOU TO CUT US FREE AT ONCE!
THE NERVOUS LACKEY TAKES A HASTY, INVOLUNTARY STEP FORWARD, AS IF TO OBEY...
...THEN REMEMBERS HIMSELF, AND STAMMERS IN ABJECT APOLOGY...
I...F-FORGIVE ME, MY KING, BUT I... THEY WOULD SLAY ME... AND BEFORE THAT, TORTURE ME...
AYE, NO DOUBT THEY WOULD.
WELL... I TRIED.
YOU TRIED?! IF THAT'S THE BEST YOU CAN DO, OLD MAN, I'D RATHER BE A THIEF THAN A KI--
CROM AND MITRA!
AAAAAIIIEEEEEE


FREE US, MAN!
B-BUT I... I--
FREE US, YOUR MASTER IS IN PERIL!
WE'RE THE ONLY ONES WHO CAN HELP!!
THIS TIME THE GUARD HESITATES FIRST...
...THOUGH ONLY FOR A TREMBLING MOMENT...
...THEN SLASHES THE ROPES...
...AND BACKS AWAY IN SPEECHLESS TERROR AS ANOTHER SHRIEK RIPS FROM THE RUINS.
AAAIIIEEEE
AND, AS CONAN RETRIEVES THEIR FALLEN SWORDS...
THE CRAVEN JACKAL! HE'S RUNNING AWAY!
LET HIM!
AT LEAST HE FREED US--AND OUR BUSINESS, AS EVER, AWAITS IN THE RUINS.
HERE!
BUT AT THE SHADOWY ENTRANCE TO THE TEMPLE, THEY FREEZE--FACED SUDDENLY BY A HURTLING BULK FROM WITHIN...

IT IS NOT, HOWEVER, WHAT THEY FEARED...
NOOOO!!
HELLLLP!!
AHA! WELL, CONAN, AS I ALWAYS SAY...
AGE BEFORE BEAUTY, MY IDOL.
CROM CRACK YOUR CURSED BONES, PUP!
OUT OF MY WAY--I'LL KILL YOU!
THAT'S IT, BIG ONE--THE OLD MAN'S THE ONE YOU WANT.
AND REMEMBER, MY KING...
NO KILLING.
URK!
NOT THIS TIME, WHELP--
--AND YOU CAN THANK MITRA I DON'T GO AFTER TWO KILLS.
HAVE A CARE, CONAN--YOU ALMOST CRUSHED ME UNDER HIS DYING WEIGHT!
THAT, THANDAR, WAS THE IDEA...
NOW WIPE OFF THAT SMIRK AND STAND READY TO DO MORE THAN JAPE.
THE NEXT THREAT, I WAGER, WON'T BE SO EASY TO DODGE.
SOBERED BY A GLANCE AT CONAN'S GLOWERING BLUE EYES, THANDAR FOLLOWS WITHOUT COMMENT.
NO USE, AFTER ALL, IN PRESSING ONE'S LUCK.


TORCHES--AT LEAST PONTRERO AND HIS MEN HAVE ALREADY LIT THE WAY. BUT TELL ME, CONAN...
HAVE YOU E'ER SEEN THE LIKES OF THESE RUINS?
AYE--THEY'RE MUCH LIKE A REBUILT CITY I ONCE VISITED...
...WHEN I COMMANDED A BAND OF KOZAKI MERCENARIES FROM THE TURAN STEPPES.
A "REBUILT" CITY?
AYE, REBUILT BY A DOG NAMED VIRATA, MAGUS OF THE HIDDEN ONES--THE ASSASSIN CULT OF OF YEZM.
THE ORIGINAL CITY WAS CALLED YANAIDAR, BUILT IN THE ILBERS MOUNTAINS OF KUSHAF THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO BY THE GHOUL-KING URA.
AND, BY CROM, GHOULS STILL HAUNTED THE PLACE.
TRULY, YOU HAVE SEEN AND DONE MUCH, CONAN. IS IT GHOULS THEN DO YOU THINK, WHICH STILL INFEST THIS PLACE?
I SEE NOT HOW OR WHY...
...BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE IN YANAIDAR WHICH COULD ACCOUNT FOR THOSE SCREAMS WE HEARD, AND--
TURNING THE CORNER, CONAN ABRUPTLY HALTS, HIS EYES DARKENING.
AYE... IT'S AS I FEARED.
COME. LOOK.
BRISSA! BUT HER BACK--TWISTED, BROKEN--AND HER SKULL, CONAN! WHAT COULD WREAK SUCH CARNAGE--?
THE HAUNTER OF THE MAZE...
MY OLD FRIEND BALASH, THE KUSHAFI CHIEFTAN, CALLED IT A DEMON, AND WELL IT MAY BE... BUT TOO, IT CAN BE SLAIN LIKE ANY OTHER MAN OR BEAST.
I PROVED THAT. YET THE GIRL'S BEEN STABBED, AS WELL--AND THAT'S SOMETHING NEW.
COME, AND WE SHALL SEE IF I'M RIGHT, OR--
YYYAAAAAAAA


FOLLOWING THE RAGGED LENGTH OF THE SCREAM, THEY PLUNGE INTO A VAST AND SHADOWED CHAMBER OF MYSTERY--NOW CRUMBLED BY SLOW TIME, HAUNTED BY STARK NIGHTMARE...
MITRA'S BLOOD, CONAN! THOSE...THOSE--MONSTERS--ARE THEY WHAT YOU SPOKE OF?!
CONAN NODS, GAZING AT THE SAME CREATURE HE FACED IN THE MAZE-LIKE JUMBLE OF BROKEN BLACK ROCK OUTSIDE YANAIDAR--THE SNOW APE, THE DESERT OF FORBIDDEN PATHENIA.
BUT THIS TIME THERE ARE THREE OF THEM--ALSO GUARDIANS, BUT OF TREASURE RATHER THAN A MAZE, AND ADAPTED TO THE MORE TEMPERATE CLIME OF AQUILONIA...
AND THESE THREE, UNLIKE THE ONE HE FACED SO LONG AGO... POSSESS ENOUGH INTELLIGENCE TO WIELD THE FLAME KNIFE.

PONTRERO ALONE STANDS STILL ALIVE IN THEIR MIDST, DESPERATELY CLUTCHING A SMALL CASK TO HIS CHEST...

THE REAL TREASURE, NO DOUBT.
BUT EVEN IF THE OBESE NOBLE SCARCELY DESERVES TO LIVE--

RAARRGH
--NO ONE DESERVES A DEATH DESIGNED BY DEMONS SUCH AS THESE.

CONAN! HELP ME!
FOR THE LOVE OF MITRA, MY KING-- SAVE ME!!
THE CASK OF TREASURE, AT LAST, FALLS AWAY IN THE FACE OF GREATER CONCERN...
AGH-H!
TOO LATE.
PONTRERO'S WOUNDED-- AND TWO OF THE BEASTS YET REMAIN.
ENGAGE THE OTHER ONE, THANDAR-- KEEP IT AWAY FROM ME!
AYE, BUT I'LL DO IT FOR THE TREASURE, CONAN-- NOT FOR PONTRERO'S FAT HIDE!
SUIT YOURSELF, WHELP-- YOU SOUND LIKE ME TWENTY YEARS PAST.
BUT FIGHT LIKE HELL ITSELF RIGHT NOW AND MAYHAP YOU'LL LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO REALIZE, AS I HAVE, THAT THERE ARE SOME THINGS WORTH MORE THAN TRE-
UHR?
RUHRRR
--UHN!

ONE THING I FORGOT, THANDAR...
DON'T LET ITS BLADE SO MUCH AS SCRATCH YOU...
THE HIDDEN ONES OFTEN TREATED THEIR FLAME KNIVES WITH BURNING POISON!
RUHRR
NOT THAT I'D INVITE A SCRATCH FROM EVEN A CLEAN BLADE SHAPED LIKE THEIRS...
...BUT--
--NOW YOU TELL ME!
EH--? CONAN! WHERE DID YOU--?
UP THERE?
PONTRERO HAS ALREADY BEEN SEVERELY SAVAGED, HE KNOWS...
... AND MAY WELL GREET HIS ANCESTORS EVEN NOW...
...BUT SINCE THERE'S STILL THE CHANCE, HOWEVER SLIGHT, THAT THE FLAME-BLADE IS UNTREATED... AND ITS POWERFUL THRUST MISSED THE NOBLE'S HEART--
--CONAN LEAPS.

BESIDES, EVEN IF PONTRERO IS DEAD, THERE IS HIS OWN SKIN TO THINK OF NOW--AND THANDAR'S AS WELL.
GRARRR
SLAYING THE BEAST MAY WELL BE THE ONLY MEANS OF ESCAPE FROM THIS HELLISH TEMPLE OF R'SHANN.
C-CONAN...
BUT PONTRERO DOES LIVE--
--ONLY BRIEFLY, FROM THE SOUND OF HIS GURGLING VOICE, YET LIVE HE DOES.
AND, TOO, DESPITE CONAN'S PROTESTS, THERE IS STILL THE LOOT TO BE HAD...
MAYHAP HE HAS NOT COME SO FAR OR SO MANY YEARS FROM YOUNG THANDAR, AFTER ALL...
HAH! MINE SEEMS NONE TOO EAGER TO FALL, CONAN!
HOW ABOUT YOURS?
DIE, CURSE YOU!
RRGK
DIE!!

WAS HE RIGHT ABOUT THESE MONSTERS?
CAN THEY BE SLAIN LIKE ANY OTHER MAN OR BEAST?
YES.
UHRMPH
AS I SAID ONCE BEFORE, CONAN...
NOT BAD FOR AN OLD MAN.
URGH?
BUT STILL...
WITH CONSIDERABLY LESS FLAIR THAN YOUTH COMMANDS.
AND LESS TIME, TOO, WHELP...
...NOT TO MENTION LESS BOASTING.
NOW--SHALL WE SEE ABOUT PONTRERO?

F-FORGIVE ME, CONAN... I WAS ONLY DOING WHAT YOU HAD DONE...
NOT SO, PONTRERO--I AM HARDLY A TYRANT OF MY PREDECESSOR NUMENIDES' RANK.
MAYHAP YOU ARE RIGHT... AND MAYHAP FATE KNEW WHAT I KNEW NOT...
...THAT I AM NOT HALF THE MAN YOU ARE...
...NOR WOULD I HAVE MADE HALF... THE KING...
HE SAGS, HIS FINAL BREATH A RATTLE OF DUST AND BONES.
IT'S DONE THEN, AND ALL THAT REMAINS IS THE TREAS--
CROM!
WHAT THE--?!
THEN IT ENDS WITH STILL MORE TREACHERY, EH WHELP?
MY OWN FAULT FOR NOT GUESSING--FOR SEEING TOO MUCH OF MYSELF IN YOU, AND FOR--
ROARR!
IT SLASHES THE AIR WHERE CONAN KNELT ONLY MOMENTS EARLIER...
...AND THEN IT LOSES MUCH OF ITS GROTESQUE HEAD...
...AS YOUNG THANDAR COMPLETES THE PURPOSE OF HIS ABRUPT KICK.

THEN HE SHEATHES HIS BLADE, GRINNING IN THE FACE OF CONAN'S AMAZEMENT...
MY APOLOGIES, THANDAR.
IN ME, IT SEEMS, AGE HAS BROUGHT NOT ENOUGH PATIENCE.
I JUDGED YOU TOO HASTILY!
NOW-- AS I WAS SAYING, ALL THAT REMAINS IS THE TREASURE.
LET'S GET IT OUTSIDE AND HAVE A LOOK.
AHH... NOW THE WISDOM OF AGE FINALLY SPEAKS.
OUTSIDE, AND EVEN WITH ALL THE RICHES OF A MIGHTY KINGDOM AT HIS COMMAND, CONAN IS ACTUALLY EXCITED...
THERE! IT'S OPEN AND INSIDE WE HAVE--
MORE SEED CONES?!
AYE-- RICH TREASURES INDEED TO THE CULT OF THE HIDDEN ONES, WHO'D PLACE PRIME VALUE ON THE CONJURING OF SUCH FORCES AS WE EARLIER SLEW.
BUT... ALL OF THAT... THAT ORDEAL-- JUST FOR THIS?!
IT WAS HARDLY FOR NAUGHT, BOY.
AFTER ALL, YOU DID LEARN A LESSON ABOUT THE FOLLY OF WAYWARD LOVE...
A LESSON WHOSE VALUE IS EXCEEDED ONLY BY THESE SEED CONES!
BAH!
AND NOW IT IS CONAN'S TURN TO LAUGH-- UPROARIOUSLY.
WHAT'S SO FUNNY, OLD MAN?
JUST THAT YOU DO INDEED REMIND ME OF YOUTH-- OFT-TIMES PAINFULLY SO.
OH? AND YOU'RE SO MUCH WISER WITH ONE FOOT IN YOUR GRAVE? YOU WERE TAKEN IN JUST AS MUCH AS I!
WAS I? THE COFFERS OF AQUILONIA ALREADY OVERFLOW WITH MORE RICHES THAN I CAN COUNT.
I JOINED YOUR MAD AND MERRY CHASE FOR THE SHEER JOY OF IT...

...AND I LEARNED LONG AGO THAT WHEN IT COMES TO TREASURE, THE PURSUIT IS MORE REWARDING THAN THE POSSESSION, BY FAR.
GRUDGINGLY, SHEEPISHLY, THANDAR SMILES IN RETURN.
AYE... AT LEAST WE HAD A TIME OF IT, DID WE NOT?
YOU'RE A FINE EXAMPLE INDEED, CONAN-- A PITY IT MUST END...
AYE...
WITHER NOW, THANDAR?
WANDERING, I GUESS... THE REWARD OF FURTHER PURSUIT.
NO REASON TO RETURN TO TARANTIA--SO MAYHAP I'LL STRIKE OUT TO THE SOUTH THIS TIME, FOR STYGIA.
STYGIA...
AYE, THERE'S MUCH TO DO IN THAT SHADOWED LAND.
WHEN ONE ESCAPES STYGIA ALIVE, ONE KNOWS HE HAS TRULY LIVED...
WELL.
FAREWELL, ROGUE--YOU HAVE DREAMS TO SHAPE AND LEGENDS TO CARVE.
...WHILE I HAVE A KINGDOM TO NURSEMAID.
JUST DON'T FOLLOW MY EXAMPLE ON ONE SCORE--FOR NOT EVERY FOOL'S PATH CAN END AT THE FOOT OF A THRONE.
FEAR NOT, CONAN--MY AMBITION RISES NOT THAT HIGH.
BUT THEN AGAIN, OLD MAN...
...EVEN IDOLS EVENTUALLY NEED REPLACING.
END.

KING CONAN

℅ MARVEL COMICS GROUP
387 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10016

DENNIS O'NEIL
EDITOR
RALPH MACCHIO
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Editors,

KING CONAN #13 was the best issue of this title published so far. Doug's writing captures the essential Conan, and it is a pleasure to see a cast of permanent supporting characters at last. But the thing that made this issue exceptional was the arrival of Mark Silvestri as regular penciler. I'm hoping to see Mr. Silvestri's artwork gracing this book for a long time. Don't get me wrong, John Buscema and Ernie Chan are just great, but it's about time someone came along to share the Conan workload. Good luck, Mark!

Some suggestions for the future: multi-issue storylines; fewer evil wizards; an occasional humorous tale, not necessarily satirical — after all, life is more than hacking at rebels and monsters with a broadsword, even for the king of Aquilonia. As for letters page title, how about "King's Chronicles" or "Monarch's Mail"?

Keep up the great work.

Rick Platt
Purchase Brook Road 1228
Southbury, CT 06488

Well, Rick, Silvestri's Cimmerian seems to have captured the fancy of anyone within half a Hyborian league of issue #13 if our mail is any indication. And those of you lucky enough to have been here for Mr. Silvestri's debut, don't be selfish now, y'hear? Pass the word around that the new-look KING CONAN's *worth* a look. (As a matter of fact, we ourselves thought that Mark's version of the Khitan dragon was one of the more dramatic and colorful beasts to have given our Aquilonian Ace a workout in some time.)

Dear Denny and Ralph,

Today I received my subscription copy of KING CONAN #13. It was magnificent! I loved it all, especially the exotic, multi-colored web in which Conan fought the homunculi. My only question would be with the credibility of Conan's hang-glider, a little bit far out? The ending was just great. Keep it up.

John Locke
3 Ware Road
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Wait a minute, John. You mean little pink homunculi are okay, but home-made hang-glider stretches the imagination? Seriously though, we understand what you're suggesting — that technological innovations in the stories must be measured against the general level of technology in the Hyborian age while fantasy elements have rules of their own. For a handle on both we'd like to recommend *The Blades of Conan,* a collection of R.E. Howard/Hyborian-related essays edited by L. Sprague De Camp for Ace Books. No compleat Conanophile should be without it.

Dear Denny,

I have just finished reading KING CONAN #13 and would like to offer the following comments. First off, the cover was great, one of the best ever to appear here. Talk about realism in the Hyborian Age — how many monsters go around with broken nails? By the way, did Conan invent the hang-glider?

The wizards and wizardess were excellently portrayed despite their being a shade stereotypical. The story itself was also excellent, though I would have loved to see it spread over several issues with Conan battling one wizard per issue. The art by Mark Silvestri was terrific, maintaining the highest standards of the series.

Now, some suggestions. How about letting King Conan take to the seas again for an issue or two? Or how about engaging the Kingdom of Aquilonia in a multi-issue war? Conan is always at his best in battle, and we could stand to see a real war between nations after the more limited rebellions of the last few issues.

Finally, to address the problem of Conan's beard, as raised in issue #13's letter column. I think I have a simple solution to explain the sudden growth of hair on the king in #11. Conan may have a rare genetic disorder inherited by him from his ancestors. This disorder retards the growth of facial hair until the age of fifty or so; it's a sort of "delayed puberty syndrome" which affects only Conan and a few others. Do you buy that, huh?

Well, that's all for now. Keep up the great work.

Carlos Hinojosa
2013 Jay Avenue
McAllen, TX 78501

Make sure to check out this past summer's CONAN THE BARBARIAN ANNUAL #7, Carlos, if you haven't already done so. It's King-Sized and (surprise!) *King* Conan stars in an exciting tale that takes our barbarian out on the bounding main as per your suggestion.

As for the savage *beard* of Conan — well, Crom's whiskers, the controversy still rages, and your solution is but one among many as evidenced by the next two responses.

Dear Editors,

After reading the letters page to issue #13, I began to think about how Conan was able to grow a beard in an earlier story, and I've come to the conclusion that, as argued by Mr. Tierstein, Conan does not, as a rule, need to shave. This seems obvious. But the solution may not be as difficult as at first appears. Let's not forget that the time period with which we are dealing is the Hyborian Age where magic thrives and almost anything is possible through wizardry. On several occasions Conan himself has been transformed into another creature altogether. It would be simple enough and reasonable enough to assume that the King purchased the services of a local sorcerer who, with a few magic words, provided the normally beardless monarch with a hairy disguise that sprouted during his journey and lasted for the necessary period of time.

Kevin Lindenmuth
36038 Crompton Circle
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Dear Editor,

In KING CONAN #13, you requested assistance in explaining how Conan suddenly was able to grow a beard. One possible solution stares us right in the face, and that is that Conan was always able to grow a beard and simply shaved regularly off-panel. A battle-hardened warrior such as Conan would have little need of water or a razor to remove his beard. Conan never goes anywhere without a sword which may be sharpened with a rock, a piece of flint, or even a leather saddle strap. Many other objects may be used to shave with as well, such as a sharpened shell, a piece of metal armor, or the buckle of a sword belt. These are just a few of the makeshift "razors" with which Conan would always have found himself surrounded.

All men have facial hair. In the case of the American Indians (as, I imagine, analogously in the case of the Picts) facial hair is often pulled out by the roots, and thus beards are rare. I hope this letter will have helped you.

Freddie W. Young
Rt 1, Box 610
Kountze, TX 77625

Thanks for the theorizing, Freddie and Kevin. Your letters represent the basic ideas put forward by the majority of respondents. But we're not ready to close the casebooks on the subject of Hyborian hirsuteness just yet, so if there's anyone still left out there who'd like to add his or her two drachmas to the debate, we're waiting to hear from you.

Dear Marvel,

Although the credits in KING CONAN #11 did not include John Buscema, it was still a terrific issue. Doug Moench's script was just great — I loved it! I think the best things in this issue were the establishment of Conan's friends, their true feelings for him, and his own memories of his youth. Robert E. Howard would be proud of your wonderful job, Doug.

I enjoyed Alan Kupperberg's artwork and especially Conan with a beard. but I think that perhaps Conan's strength was too exaggerated in his duel with the Death-Shaper. I find it hard to believe that Conan could really have deflected that massive blade. Still, other than this minor quibble, I find KING CONAN #11 to be another classic. Thanks for the great reading.

Justin Sayres
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Goonengerry, Via Lismore
2480
Australia

If you're seeking John Buscema's credits these days, Justin, you'll find them, appropriately, on the two magazines that Big John B. himself helped to establish as the biggest sword & sorcery hits in the comics biz — and that's CONAN THE BARBARIAN and companion mag SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN. And you'll want to treat yourself to Big Buscema's latest barbarian outing this fall, KULL THE CONQUEROR #1. There's 48 pages of Buscema pencils, Bulanadi inks, and authentic KULLors by Marie Severin herself — all of this and Alan Zelenetz's original script on special stock and gift-wrapped in a stunning John Bolton wraparound cover.

Well, there you have it, royal subjects, from Australia to Aquilonia. You may rise now, so long as you promise to be here when King Conan's court is called into session next issue around. Until then...